



NHS Cervical Screening Programme

Cervical screening for lesbian and bisexual women

Do lesbian and bisexual women need cervical screening?

Yes – if you want to be screened, then you should be. Sometimes, lesbian women have been advised by health workers that they don't need screening because they don't have sex with men. Or, they may be told by other lesbians that they don't need to be screened. However, women should be offered screening and consider attending, regardless of their sexual orientation.

What is cervical screening?

Cervical screening is not a test for cancer. It is a test to look for abnormal cell changes on the cervix (the neck of the womb), which may turn into cancer over time. Regular screening prevents around 75% of cervical cancers from ever developing. Screening is offered every three years to women aged 25-49, and every five years to women aged 50-64.

You will get a leaflet with your invitation to screening, called *Cervical Screening The Facts*. This tells you all about the screening process, so that you can decide whether or not you would like to be screened. A copy of the leaflet can be found on the NHS Cancer Screening Programme's website at www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical/publications/in-04.html

Where do I go for screening?

Usually, cervical screening is carried out at your GP practice, by the practice nurse. You can choose to be screened at a Sexual Health Clinic/Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) Clinic if you prefer. You can also be screened at a Family Planning Clinic or a Well Woman Clinic.

What causes cervical cancer?

Nearly all cases of cervical cancer are associated with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which is a sexually transmitted infection. The virus causes changes in the cells of the cervix, which can go on to develop into cancer over time if left untreated.

HPV can be carried by someone for a number of years, without them ever knowing it. This means that if you have previously had sex with a man, or a partner has ever had sex with a man, then you may have been exposed to the virus. Studies involving lesbian and bisexual women found between 3% and 30% of the women in the study groups tested positive for the HPV virus.

I've been told I can't get cervical cancer because I don't have sex with men. Is that true?

No. Research suggests that although HPV is more easily transmitted through heterosexual intercourse, it can also be transmitted through lesbian intercourse. As with other sexually transmitted infections, HPV is passed on through body fluids. This means that oral sex, transferring vaginal fluids on hands and fingers, or sharing sex toys, can all be ways of being exposed to HPV.

As well as sexual behaviour, smoking is also a risk factor for cervical cancer. Studies suggest that lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to smoke, or to have smoked in the past, than heterosexual women.

Should I be screened every 3-5 years, the same as heterosexual women?

Yes. There is no evidence to suggest that lesbian or bisexual women should be screened any more or less often. Research suggests however that lesbian women may be less likely to go for regular screening at the recommended intervals; and lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to have never been screened than heterosexual women.

My GP/practice nurse has told me I don't need to be screened because I'm a lesbian, or because I haven't had sex with a man in recent years. Is that right?

Only women who have never had sex at all (with either men or women) may be advised that the risk of them developing cervical cancer is so low, that screening is not necessary. Even then, a woman should not be refused screening if she requests it. As long as you are aged 25-64, and you have a cervix, then you are eligible for screening.

Will I be asked about my sexual orientation at my screening appointment?

No, but some women may find that they get asked sexual health questions more appropriate for heterosexual women, such as 'do you use contraception?' You may wish to mention your sexual orientation so that the information you are asked for or given is more appropriate.

Summary:

- ALL women aged 25-64, who have a cervix, are eligible for cervical screening.
- Nearly all cases of cervical cancer are associated with the HPV virus, which is a sexually transmitted infection.
- HPV can be passed on during sex between women, although the risk of infection through heterosexual intercourse is thought to be higher.
- Even if you have never had sex with a man, a partner (or a partner's partner) may have. This means you could still have been exposed to the HPV virus.
- Regular cervical screening prevents around 75% of cervical cancers developing.

Cervical cancer: symptom advice

The most common symptom is bleeding from the vagina at times other than during your period. This includes during or after penetrative sex, and bleeding at any time if you have passed the menopause. Other symptoms are an unpleasant-smelling vaginal discharge, and pain or discomfort during penetrative sex. Other conditions much less serious than cervical cancer can also cause these symptoms. If you are concerned, you should speak to your GP, or visit a GUM or Well Woman Clinic for advice.

The data for this information sheet is taken from Fish, J (2009) *Cervical screening in lesbian and bisexual women: a review of the worldwide literature using systematic methods*. De Montfort University, Leicester. Details of this publication, including a PDF download, are available at www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical/publications/lesbian-bi-literature-review.html