



# Outs and Ins

A resource booklet for lesbian  
and bisexual women's health



## Lesbian, bisexual and same sex attracted women's health

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For more detailed information see Ruth McNair's website. URL: [www.dialog.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.dialog.unimelb.edu.au)

## Information and resources

This pamphlet is for women who are same-sex attracted, have a female partner, identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. It covers a range of health issues and information, drawn from local research on lesbian and bisexual women's health. Some of these issues apply to all women, and for these we list lesbian-specific resources. Other issues are specific to lesbian lifestyles or result from living in a world that can still be homophobic or assume that every woman is heterosexual. Most support groups and services listed are based in Victoria.

Women can use this information to become better informed about their own health and health care. Health care providers can also use it to become better informed of lesbian-specific needs.

## Sexual orientation - attraction, identity and coming out

Many people develop a slowly growing awareness of their same sex attractions. This often occurs during adolescence, however can occur at any age. Identifying as a lesbian or bisexual may or may not follow. Knowing when, where and how to come out as a same sex attracted woman is important. Some women find coming out easy and others need support and help to deal with negative attitudes. It can be very useful to discuss these issues with a sensitive health care provider.

### A helpful book

Erin Shale (editor) - Inside Out: an Australian collection of coming out stories.  
Bookman Press, Melbourne, 1999.

### Resources

Coming Out Australia

URL: [www.comingout.com.au](http://www.comingout.com.au)

### Youth Specific

Alsorts Directory – for young people

URL: [www.also.org.au/see Resources section and go to Youth](http://www.also.org.au/see%20Resources%20section%20and%20go%20to%20Youth)

Same Sex Attracted Youth Website

URL: [www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay)

## Healthy same sex relationships

Many women find happy and fulfilling same sex relationships. Gaining recognition of the importance of your relationship from family and friends can be helpful to support you and your partner. It is also important during difficult times or after separation, as some lesbians and bisexual women find that their stress at these times is not acknowledged. A common myth is that two women in a relationship could not be aggressive or violent towards each other. Intimate partner abuse (domestic violence) can happen and there are some specific resources available to support women through this.

### Resources and information

Drummond Street Relationship Centre, 195 Drummond St, Carlton.

Phone: 03 9663 6733

URL: [www.dsrgc.org.au](http://www.dsrgc.org.au)

Domestic Violence Incest and Resource Centre, Victoria Australia.

Information for lesbians on violence and abuse in relationships.

URL: <http://www.dvirc.org.au>

Same Sex Domestic Abuse, an {also} Foundation Resource Series

URL: <http://www.also.org.au/> See Resources section and go to Domestic Violence

## Pap smears, sexual health, and preventing sexually transmissible infections (STIs)

Women who have sex with women are no different from other women in needing to have Pap tests every two years. The cause of most abnormal Pap tests is human papilloma virus (HPV) and HPV can be transmitted from one woman to another during sex. It is a myth that lesbians don't need Pap tests, however in Australia, young lesbians have less regular pap tests than their peers. A vaccine is now available to protect women from some types of HPV so talk to your GP about whether you should have it. Maintaining sexual health includes communicating with your sexual partner about each of your preferred sexual practices. Women who have sex with women can be infected with STIs and can infect their partner during sex. Infections include those of the cervix or pelvis such as Chlamydia, of the vagina such as 'BV' or thrush, and of the vulva such as herpes. Undetected STIs

can lead to reduced fertility and abnormalities of the cervix including cancers, so preventing STIs is important. Safe sex includes preventing sharing of vaginal and cervix fluids between women, and/or using different fingers or hands, using condoms on sex toys, and using dams or avoiding oral sex when a cold sore (oral herpes) is present. Herpes can also rarely be transmitted between outbreaks if the virus is being shed from the skin.

### A helpful book

Carol Booth. *Woman to woman: a guide to lesbian sexuality*. Sydney: Simon and Schuster; 2002.

### More information

A website dedicated to safe sex information for women who have sex with women. Created by Family Planning ACT  
URL: <http://www.girl2girl.info/>

Lesbians Need Pap Tests Too, Pap Screen Victoria  
URL: <http://www.papscreen.org.au/article.asp?ContentID=A17>

## Polycystic ovaries

There is some evidence that lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to have polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS). This condition can create increased hair growth (hirsutism), weight gain, irregular periods, and reduced fertility. In the longer term it can increase the risk of developing diabetes. If you have any of these symptoms it is worth having tests for PCOS, which include a blood test for hormone levels and an ultrasound to look at your ovaries.

### Resources:

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association of Australia  
URL: <http://www.posaa.asn.au/>

Jean Hailes Clinic. , Clayton, Victoria  
URL: [http://www.jeanhailes.org.au/issues/oi\\_pcos.htm](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au/issues/oi_pcos.htm)

## Breast health

All women need to be familiar with their own breasts and check regularly for any changes. Women with same sex partners often work together to check each other's breasts and remind each other to do so. Unfortunately, more lesbians than heterosexual women are likely to have risks for breast cancer including smoking, being overweight and not having had a pregnancy. This makes it even more important to have mammograms every two years from the age of 50.

### Resources:

Cancer Council of Victoria  
URL: <http://www.acv.org.au/>

The Mautner project This is a USA-based site for lesbians about cancer and other health issues.  
URL: [www.mautnerproject.org](http://www.mautnerproject.org)

## Fertility, getting pregnant and parenting

Increasing numbers of lesbians are forming families. Conception methods for fertile women include insemination of your known donor's sperm at home or in a clinic, or insemination of an anonymous donor's sperm in a clinic. If a woman has not become pregnant after 2 to 6 cycles of insemination she is likely to be offered IVF. You can see a GP to arrange pre-pregnancy tests such as rubella immunity, and also to work out when you are ovulating. If you wish to use a clinic for insemination you need a referral from a GP.

From 1st January 2010, the law in Victoria allows lesbians and single women access to insemination and IVF services at clinics, and full parental rights for the non-birth mother if her name is on the child's birth certificate as a parent. There are still negative community opinions about lesbian parenting. Most of these opinions relate to a belief that children with lesbian parents are disadvantaged, however research has repeatedly found that these children do just as well as children with heterosexual parents.



## Information about health and legal issues for getting pregnant

Royal Women's Hospital. Pride and Joy: a resource for prospective lesbian parents in Victoria. Melbourne, 2006. Phone: 03 8345 3045, Email: whic@thewomens.org.au

URL: <http://www.thewomens.org.au/>

See Women's Health Publication and go to Pride and Joy Online

## Support and information

Maybe Baby

URL: [maybebabymelbourne.multiply.com](http://maybebabymelbourne.multiply.com)

Prospective lesbian parenting group

URL: [www.vicnet.net.au/~plpvic](http://www.vicnet.net.au/~plpvic)

Rainbow Families Council of Victoria

This group offers support, information, lobbying and education regarding rainbow families. It coordinates the regular Rainbow Families conferences in Melbourne for lesbian and gay parented families

URL: <http://www.rainbowfamilies.org.au/>

## Mental Health

Maintaining mental health for lesbians and bisexual women relies on being able to find supportive friends and effective ways of dealing with negative community attitudes and homophobic discrimination. Some women live with high levels of stress due to needing to hide their orientation from work colleagues, friends or family; or feeling isolated; or being out but abused due to their sexual orientation. As a result of this stress, more lesbians and particularly bisexual women suffer from depression or anxiety than heterosexual women.

### **Depression resources**

See beyond blue fact sheets for GLBTI adults and youth

URL: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

### **Anxiety resources**

URL: [www.adavic.org](http://www.adavic.org)

Lesbian-aware counselling is available at the Victorian Aids Council, 6 Claremont St, South Yarra.

Phone: 03 9865 6700, 1800 134 840.

URL: [www.vicaids.asn.au](http://www.vicaids.asn.au)

Lesbian Zest- how to thrive and flourish – a booklet available at

URL: [www.glhv.org.au/node/400#attachments](http://www.glhv.org.au/node/400#attachments)

Thriving as a bisexual or queer woman- tips on how to flourish- a booklet available at

URL: [www.glhv.org.au/node/401#attachments](http://www.glhv.org.au/node/401#attachments)

The {also} Directory Online- Has many LGBT service providers listed

URL: [www.also.org.au](http://www.also.org.au)

## Physical, emotional and sexual assault

More than twice as many lesbian and bisexual women have experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse than heterosexual women. The reason for this is not known, but it may relate to homophobia. These experiences do not 'cause' women to be lesbian however, contrary to a common myth in our community. It is important to find a health care provider to talk with about these experiences if they continue to affect your mental or physical health.

### **Support and Information**

Centre Against Sexual Assault information and locations.

URL: <http://www.casa.org.au/>

Same Sex Domestic Abuse, an {also} Foundation Resource Series  
<http://www.also.org.au/> See Resources section and go to Domestic Violence

Victoria Police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers  
Phone: 03 9247 6944 or email: [melbourne.gllo@police.vic.gov.au](mailto:melbourne.gllo@police.vic.gov.au)

## Substance use including smoking, drugs and alcohol

More lesbian and bisexual women than heterosexual women use illicit drugs, smoke and drink harmful amounts of alcohol. One reason for this is that some women are using these substances to help overcome the stress of living with homophobia. Another reason is that substance use at lesbian and bisexual social events and venues is very common. Women can access support from each other and from health care providers to find healthier methods for reducing stress and finding substance-free recreation.

### Resources and Information

ACON (NSW)  
Website contains a number of resources for information and support:  
<http://www.acon.org.au/> See Alcohol + Other Drugs section

Quit  
Information for smoking cessation.  
URL: [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au)

Direct Line  
For phone counselling and advice about illicit drug use 24 hours per day.  
Phone: 1800 888 236

Turning Point  
A public service for treatment of substance use at 54–62 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy.  
Phone: 03 8413 8413 Email: [info@turningpoint.org.au](mailto:info@turningpoint.org.au)  
URL: [www.turningpoint.org.au](http://www.turningpoint.org.au)

## Fitness, weight and exercise

We know that in general, more lesbians and same sex attracted women have a healthy body image than heterosexual women, regardless of their weight. More lesbians are involved in sport and other physical activity, and more Australian lesbians are interested in complementary therapies for health and well-being.

### Resources

International organisations run sporting events for LGBT people, and there are many Australian LGBT sporting teams and individual that attend:

<http://www.gaygames.com/en/>

<http://www.glsa.org>

<http://www.queersportsmelbourne.org/>

## Menopause

Same sex attracted women may experience menopause very differently to heterosexual women. There has been little research in this area, although a study of Australian lesbians' experiences of menopause revealed that many women gained support from their female partner during this period of their life. Many women were also committed to using lifestyle and complementary therapies to manage their menopause. Jenny Kelly. Zest for life: lesbians' experiences of menopause. Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2005.

### Information

Jean Hailes Foundation, Melbourne.

URL: <http://www.jeanhailes.org.au/issues/menopause.htm>

## Older Women's Health

Older same sex attracted women can be fearful of a time when they might need more health care support, and particularly of whether their partnership will be recognised and respected. Many health care providers and aged care facilities are found to be ignorant of older lesbians' needs and to ignore the importance of sexuality. Legal vulnerability of same sex relationships is particularly important when partners become unwell, require residential aged care or die.

### Resources and Support

The Matrix Guild  
They are committed to the establishment of appropriate care, accommodation and the support of alternative lifestyle options for lesbians over 40. Contact: PO Box 99, Fairfield 3078;  
Phone: 03 8400 2055  
[www.matrixguildvic.org.au](http://www.matrixguildvic.org.au)

{also} Foundation Seniors Project  
A community-based needs assessment of LGBT people aged over 50 which suggests actions needed to improve lifestyle and health.  
Heather Birch and Daryl Higgins (editors). About Time. GLBT Seniors ALSO Matter, 2004.  
URL: <http://www.also.org.au/> See Resources section and go to Seniors

Rainbow Visions  
A website managed by a group in the Hunter Valley, NSW, with a wide range of resources and links  
URL: [www.rainbowvisions.org.au](http://www.rainbowvisions.org.au)

GLBTI Retirement Association Incorporated GRAI  
A group based in WA that is advocating for better lifestyle and support during ageing.  
URL: [www.grai.org](http://www.grai.org)



## Finding sensitive health care providers

Same sex attracted women can have difficulty finding health care providers who have a sensitive and aware approach to their health care. Word of mouth is often the best way to find a sensitive provider. Also attending with a friend can be useful for the first visit. Many health care providers have not had specific education about lesbian and bisexual women's health issues, so at times you may need to share information with them about your lifestyle and specific health needs.

## Coming Out to health care providers

### WHY

You don't need to come out to every health care provider. It is helpful however with people you may see regularly and who take an interest in the social aspects of your health such as your GP. Knowing about your lifestyle, social networks and partner can help them to understand you better and build a more trusting relationship.

### WHEN

You might use the service intake form to come out, or wait until you get to know the provider a little.

## HOW

Research has shown that most lesbian and bisexual women prefer to be asked about their sexual orientation whereas most health care providers prefer to be told rather than ask. This often leads to a situation where the subject is not discussed. There are many ways you can tell. If you have a female partner you could mention her name. You could say that you are lesbian or bisexual if your sexual identity is important to you. You could also talk about what you do that relates to your sexual orientation, such as who you have sex with, or the lesbian or bisexual groups you attend.

### Information

A guide to GLBTI inclusive practice Produced by the Ministerial Advisory Committee on GLBTI health and wellbeing  
URL: [www.health.vic.gov.au/glbtimeac](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/glbtimeac)

Australian Medical Association Position Statement on Sexual Identity and Gender Diversity, October 2002  
URL: [www.ama.com.au](http://www.ama.com.au)

The Australian Lesbian Medical Association can provide information about local lesbian doctors.  
URL: [www.almas.net.au](http://www.almas.net.au)

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, USA. Clinical Guidelines: Creating a safe clinical environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex clients.  
URL: [http://www.glma.org/medical/clinical/lgbti\\_clinical\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.glma.org/medical/clinical/lgbti_clinical_guidelines.pdf)

## General lesbian health information

### Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria

A coordinating unit for lesbian and gay health, including a web-based clearing house for local and international health information and research.

Phone: 03 9285 5382

Email: [info@glhv.org.au](mailto:info@glhv.org.au)

URL: [www.glvh.org.au](http://www.glvh.org.au)

### Women's Health in the South East

Lesbian health program run by Carmel at Lifeworks, 15 Scott St Dandenong 3175

Phone: 03 9794 8677

Email: [whise@vicnet.net.au](mailto:whise@vicnet.net.au),

URL: [www.vicnet.net.au/whise](http://www.vicnet.net.au/whise)

### Women's Health Grampians

Lesbian Health is a focus. 2 Drummond St South Ballarat 3350

Email: [adminv@whg.org.au](mailto:adminv@whg.org.au)

URL: <http://www.whg.org.au/>

### WIRE – women's information and referral exchange

A telephone service run by women for women and based in Victoria.

Phone: 1300 134 130

9am to 5pm Monday to Friday

URL: <http://www.wire.org.au>

### ACON (NSW).

Women's health information and resources <http://www.acon.org.au/> See Women's Health section

### Gay and Lesbian Switchboard

For information, counselling and referral 6-10pm Mon, Tue, Thur 2-10pm Wed 6-9pm Fri, Sat & Sun

Phone: 1800 184 527

URL: <http://www.switchboard.org.au>

### Dr Kate O'Hanlan's website

Contains some excellent lesbian health information.

URL: <http://www.ohanlan.com/>



