

PAP TEST

FACT SHEET



for LESBIAN WOMEN and WOMEN WHO PARTNER WITH OTHER WOMEN

What is a Pap test?

A Pap test is an important screening test which shows changes in the cells of the cervix that could lead to cancer. The cervix is the opening to the uterus. When a Pap test is done, some cells from the cervix are taken for examination.

Do lesbians need Pap tests?

In Nova Scotia, it is recommended that all women begin having regular Pap tests within 3 years of becoming sexually active or at age 21, whichever comes first. **Lesbian women and women who partner with women should follow the same Pap test screening guidelines as women who have sex with men.** Talk to your doctor or health care provider to evaluate your specific risk factors.

What specific risk factors for cervical cancer exist for lesbians?

- Lesbians share many of the same health risks as women in general. However, lesbians often underutilize health services because of homophobia, fear of discrimination, or discomfort with coming out to their health care provider.
- Lesbians also tend to be underscreened for cervical cancer (*Matheson, 1998*) because they or their **health care providers are not aware of the need for regular cervical cancer screening**. This increases the risk of a delayed diagnosis of cervical abnormalities (*Stachelberg, 1996*).
- Other risk factors for cervical cancer include smoking and exposure to HPV, the virus that plays a role in the development of cervical cancer. HPV can be spread through oral, anal or vaginal sex, vaginal-digital (digital=fingers) contact, and from shared sex toys/devices. As many as 80% of lesbians report a history of sexual activity with men (*Carroll, 1999*), increasing their risk of exposure to HPV inside the vagina. Even if you have never had sexual intercourse with a man, your partner may have and therefore, you may be at risk.



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Where can you get a Pap test?

A Pap test can be performed by a doctor, a nurse practitioner, or a specially trained nurse. If a woman prefers, she can visit a well woman clinic, walk-in clinic, Sexual Health Centre, call Doctors Nova Scotia, or speak to friends about lesbian-friendly doctors.

How can lesbians protect themselves from cervical cancer?

- Have regular Pap tests
- Delay age of first sexual activity
- Limit number of sexual partners
- Practice safe sex to reduce exposure to HPV, use a latex barrier (e.g. condom or dental dam) when having sexual intercourse
- Choose not to smoke.



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