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## Are women who have sex with women (WSW) at risk for getting HIV?



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Yes! Lesbians and women who have sex with women (WSW) can be infected with HIV, just like everyone else. Remember, it's not who you are that puts you at risk for HIV infection, it's what you do.

Due to the lack of information and research about female-to-female HIV transmission, many WSW mistakenly believe they are not at risk. The reality is that female-to-female transmission is biologically possible even though it is fairly uncommon. It is important to keep in mind that women, who identify as lesbian or who have sex with women, sometimes engage in other behaviours that put them at risk, including unprotected sex with men, injection drug use and alternative insemination.

### How do WSW get infected with HIV?

HIV is transmitted when blood (including menstrual blood), semen, vaginal fluids, or breast milk from an infected person enters the blood stream.

So, it follows that WSW can be infected with HIV by:

- having unprotected sex with women or men
- sharing injection drug equipment (needles, cookers, filters, etc.)
- sharing piercing and tattooing equipment
- sharing sex toys without using a new condom for each user or without cleaning the toys between users
- using unscreened semen from sources other than licensed sperm banks for alternative insemination.

### As a WSW, how can I make sex safer?

Talking with your partner(s) can help you make good decisions about safer sex practices (see Question 11 "How can I have sex more safely?"). Also, the following can help you make riskier sex safer.

- Cuts or sores in the mouth can increase risk during oral-vaginal and oral-anal contact. Unprotected oral sex is especially risky when your partner has her period, a vaginal infection or a rectal discharge involving blood. To make it safer, cover her genital area or anus with a latex barrier (dental dam or cut condom). You can also use non-microwavable plastic wrap.

- Cuts or sores on your fingers increase risk when you manual stimulate (masturbate) your partner’s vagina or anus. Protect your hands with latex gloves.
- When using a sex toy (vibrators, dildos), don’t share it or, before sharing it, put a new condom on it or disinfect it. (The risk of HIV infection can be reduced by washing toys thoroughly with soap and water; as an additional precaution, toys can be disinfecting by soaking them in rubbing alcohol or full-strength bleach followed by thorough rinsing with clean water.) Also, avoid putting a toy that was in a rectum directly into a vagina. The bacteria in rectal areas may cause infection and irritation in the vagina.
- Use protection if you have vaginal or anal intercourse with a man (see Question 15 “How do I talk about using condoms?”).
- Know your own and your partner’s HIV status. Get tested (see Question 23 “How do I get tested?”).

## **What about alternative insemination?**

Because HIV can be passed through semen, there is some risk involved in insemination. Currently, two women in Canada are known to have been infected with HIV through alternative insemination from anonymous donors. Both of these cases of insemination-related infection happened before HIV antibody testing was available. Using a licensed sperm bank may reduce the risk of infection since careful screening is done. Guidelines for screening semen donors include that the donor be tested for HIV on the day of semen donation, and that the semen be frozen; the donor is tested again 6 months later and then, if he is found to be HIV negative, the semen can be used. Since it can take the body from 3 to 6 months after infection to produce enough antibodies to be detectable by the test, these guidelines ensure that the donation was not taken during the “window period.” If you know the donor, talk with your doctor or health care provider about HIV screening.

***For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.***

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