

Safer sex between women ^[1]

Hi Alice,

I am a young gay female. I am in the middle of a relationship. It is the first time for both of us. A friend gave us a book of stories and poems, etc. about gay relationships. In a couple, there were mentions of safe sex. I never realized that sex between two women was not safe. If you could give me any details of safer sex, it would ease my mind.

Thank you.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's great that you're asking these questions because it's a common misperception that sex between female-identifying partners is without risk. While women who have sex with women (WSW) are typically at *lower* risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, they're still at risk for some infections. As such, practicing safer sex is still a good idea to keep both you and your potential partner(s) safe. Read on for more about infections for which WSW may be at risk, how they're transmitted, and prevention strategies to utilize while still keeping it fun in the bedroom.

Though there are a number of STIs that are less common among WSW, sexual contact between female partners does still provide opportunities for exposure. Infections may still be passed in a number of ways, including through skin-to-skin contact, vaginal fluids or menstrual blood, and shared use of sex toys. STIs that are less likely to be transmitted between female sex partners include gonorrhea, hepatitis B, syphilis, and HIV. It's been noted, though, that WSW who have been diagnosed with any of these less common STIs often have previously had sex with male-identifying partners at some point in their lives.

The STIs that WSW are at a higher risk for include:

- Bacterial vaginosis ^[2]
- Chlamydia ^[3]
- Genital herpes ^[4]

- Human papillomavirus (HPV)
- Trichomoniasis
- Pubic lice

List adapted from the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office on Women's Health](#) [5].

With this in mind, it's wise to consider how you and your partners might protect each other and reduce the risk of infection. Safer sex between women involves many of the same strategies as for any set of partners, and the ideas below could be part of your sex life while keeping it safe and fun:

- During oral sex, cover the entire vaginal or anal area with a dam (a square of thin material, often latex or polyurethane), a cut-open condom, or latex or nitrile glove. Use creative means of keeping the material or wrap in place, such as a garter belt, to leave your hands free to roam. During vulva-to-vulva contact, a similar barrier may be placed over the vaginal area.
- If you or your partner plan on getting handy (i.e., manual penetration or fingering), a pit stop in the restroom to [wash your hands](#) [6] is a wise decision. For the penetrating partner, making sure to cover cuts or sores on the hands may also help to reduce the risk of infection; this may be done by using gloves, condoms, or finger cots. It's also recommended that you swap out for new materials when moving from the anus to the vagina or between partners.
- Is a little playtime with sex toys in order? Then it's good to make sure that the toys you're using have been washed before and after use, particularly if you plan on sharing. You might also choose to use a condom to cover the toy when in use (and use a new one if you swap with a partner).

This isn't an exhaustive list of all the creative activities you may get into between the sheets. The bottom line here is that you might use some of the tools and strategies to limit contact with your partner's skin, mucous membrane(s) (such as your mouth or vagina), or bodily fluid(s) that may put either of you at risk for infection during sex. Lastly, one more critical tool in your safer sex toolbox is having a frank conversation with your partner about STIs, safer sex methods, what activities are of interest, and whether or how often to get tested. You can check out the related Q&As for more information and tips on talking about safer sex. And now that you're informed, it's not a bad idea to stock up on some supplies of your choice and enjoy!

Alice!

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Published date:

Feb 09, 2001

Last reviewed on:

May 01, 2020

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