

For women who have sex with women

'looking after our bits'

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This leaflet has been written by lesbians and bisexual women for lesbians and bisexual women.



EQUITYPARTNERSHIP

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The myths

Have you heard the myth that lesbians do not need smears (now known as cervical screening) because they have never had sex with a man? Or the one that says women who have not had sex with a man are not at risk of cervical cancer?

They are both untrue.

One out of ten lesbians who went to London clinics for cervical screening needed treatment or further tests. One in 20 lesbians who had never had penetrative sex with a man had abnormal results.



About the test

Cervical screening (formerly known as a smear) is done to prevent cervical cancer rather than to find out whether you have cancer already. If abnormal cells are found, you will be invited in to have these removed. This means they cannot turn into cancer. If you have developed cancer the test will show this and you will be referred for treatment quickly.

Occasionally the results show an inadequate sample. This is nothing to worry about. It just indicates that the sample was too small to be read properly. You would need another repeat test.

If you have any unusual discharge between tests you should go to your doctor immediately. Don't wait for the next test.

Having your test

When you have your test you will be asked to remove your underwear from the waist down, lie on your back on a couch, and to bend your knees upwards. The doctor or nurse will then gently insert a tube, called a speculum, into your vagina to hold it open so that the cervix can be seen. The doctor or nurse will gently brush cells from the cervix. The cervix is the neck of the womb, which is at the top of your vagina.

The whole procedure only takes a few minutes.

These cells are sent to the laboratory to be looked at under a microscope. You will be sent the results of your smear test.

Most cases of cervical cancer are in women who have never had cervical screening.

If you have any unusual discharge or bleeding, including bleeding after sex, between periods or after the menopause, or feel pain when you're having sex, make an appointment to see your doctor as soon as possible. Don't wait for your next regular screening appointment.

Brush

Speculum

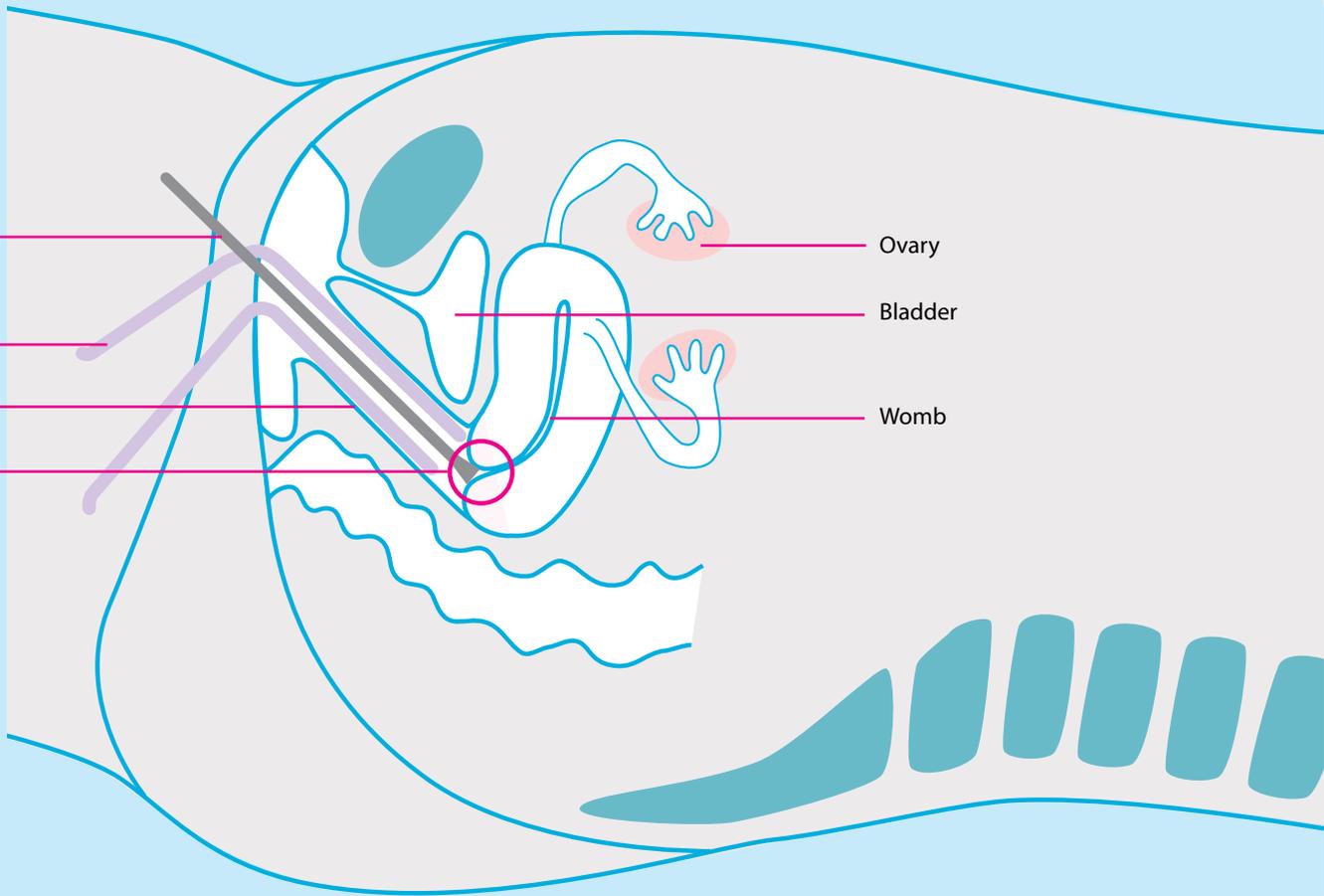
Vagina

Cervix

Ovary

Bladder

Womb



Making your test more comfortable

There's a lot you can do to make the test easier for you. It can feel a bit undignified and uncomfortable but if it starts to hurt tell the person doing the test. They can try to make it more comfortable for you. If you are more relaxed it will be easier. Remember how you usually relax and try to do this before and during the test. If you are worried, try some of the following tips:

- Take a friend or a partner into the room with you. Or if you prefer, just have a friend go to the surgery with you and wait in the waiting room
- Ask the nurse or doctor to explain what they are going to do and answer your questions before they do the test
- Tell the health worker if you are feeling nervous
- Breathe slowly and tell yourself calmly to relax – this will help you to be less tense
- If you are really frightened ask to talk through your fears with a counsellor first
- Ask for a woman to do the test (when you make the appointment)
- Ask the nurse or doctor to use a smaller speculum.



More about the test

All women who have ever had sexual contact with a woman or a man could have the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). This virus can cause changes in the cervix which can lead to cancer if they are not treated. Regular screening followed by any treatment that is needed will nearly always prevent the cells becoming cancer. If you have never had sexual contact there is a very low risk of cervical cancer but it is still advised that you have a test.

A new, more effective method of testing is now being used. This uses a brush and means that the samples are better and you are less likely to be called back for another test. This is why it is no longer called a “smear”.

In England, all women between 25 and 49 years are invited to have a test every three years, then after 50 you will be invited every five years until you are 65. If it is more than three years (or five if you are over 50) and you have not received a recent invitation, please contact your doctor.

If you have moved house please make sure your doctor has your correct address.

If you are not registered with a doctor you will miss

being called for a test. To register with a doctor you can go into your nearest surgery and ask them to take you on as a patient. You will then see a nurse who will ask you questions about your health so they have some information about you (see page 10). If you cannot find a doctor go to www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx or phone 0113 295 2500. You can use computers at the libraries for free if you are a member and it's free to join.

If you do not want to have the test at your GP's surgery you can go to one of the Contraception and Sexual Health Clinics or to the Trinity Centre (see page 11).

If you are not happy about the treatment you get at your doctor's you can change by going to another doctor's surgery and signing on. If you want to complain see PALS (page 11). You do not have to put up with a poor service.

Many lesbians, bisexual women and even some health care workers aren't sure whether lesbian and bisexual women need smear tests. A few lesbians and bisexual women are even being told that they don't need the test. If women are not tested cervical cancer may develop. If your health worker tells you that you do not need a test please go to one of the CASH clinics and let the Equity Partnership know (contact details on page 11).

After the test

For 90% of women, the test confirms that the cells of the cervix are normal. You will then be asked back for another test in three/five years.

Sometimes not enough cells have been collected for the laboratory workers to examine under a microscope. This will happen less with the new kind of test but you may be asked back for another test.

If changes in the cells of the cervix have been found you will also be invited back. Some tests show very mild changes in the cells, called a borderline result. Regardless of your test result, the person who took it will tell you what needs to happen next. Get in touch with them if you are worried about your result.

Other health issues

Breast awareness

Breast cancer is the commonest kind of cancer for women but it can be cured if caught early. It is important that you look at and feel your breasts regularly so that you know what they are usually like. Then if you notice any changes you can tell your doctor. If you have lumps, pain or discharge from the nipple make an appointment to see the doctor straight away.

Women between 50 and 70 are invited for breast screening. It is important that you are registered with a GP who has an up to date record of your address.

Sexually transmitted infections

Sexually active lesbians and bisexual women can catch sexually transmitted infections from each other.

Infections can be passed on by oral sex, by transferring vaginal fluids on hands and fingers and by sharing sex toys.

Most sexually transmitted infections can be treated easily. You can call at the clinics listed below or call at the Equity Centre for a self-completed chlamydia test.

Cervical cancer is usually the result of a sexually transmitted infection caused by some strains of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). HPV in the genital area is spread through skin contact, usually during sex. You can have the virus without any signs or symptoms. HPV is easily spread, approximately two thirds of all people who have had sexual contact with an infected partner will develop an HPV infection.

Safer sex

Sexually transmitted infections can be passed between women during sex.

You can reduce the risk by following this advice:

Avoid the transfer of vaginal fluid from yourself to your partner on fingers and hands. This means you need to avoid touching your own genitals then your partner's and vice versa.

If you use a sex toy such as a vibrator or dildo, wash it thoroughly before sharing it with your partner, or cover it with a fresh condom each time you or your partner use it. Or each of you could use your own sex toys.

If you wish to make oral sex safer, cover your partner's vulva or anus with a 'dental dam' (square of latex) before oral sex. Your local GUM/Sexual Health Clinic or the Equity Partnership will usually be able to provide you with these or advise you on where to get them. Or you can use a cut-up condom or non-microwaveable (non-porous) cling film.

Using a water-based (not oil-based) lubricant on sex toys, condoms or latex is a good idea for reducing soreness or friction during penetrative sex. Use KY jelly or a similar lubricant and not massage oil. If blood is present during sex, from your period or from sexual practice, there is a risk of HIV, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and syphilis transmission.





Coming out to health workers

Some lesbians and bisexual women come out to doctors, nurses and other health workers and some don't. There are good reasons to tell your health carers, but you do not need to do this if you don't want to. Here are some other points about coming out worth knowing:

- They should not share this information unless you want them to. Tell them whether you want your sexual orientation recorded in your notes – or not.
- You have the right to look at your medical notes.
- Your sexuality will be relevant to some kinds of health issue but not to all.
- Problems about sexual health may involve questions about relationships. If you are stressed, anxious or depressed the people who support you may be important.
- If you are affected by homophobic harassment or discrimination you may want to talk to health workers about it.
- If you take your children to the surgery it may be easier if the practice know who you have a relationship with.

Further information and help

Equity Partnership

The Equity Partnership organises groups and social events and works to improve the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the Bradford District. It offers support and does health improvement work. It can provide information and lend books and CDs on relaxation.

Call: 01274 727759 or visit
www.equitypartnership.org.uk

Contraception and Sexual Health Clinics (CASH)

For information about clinic times or appointment ring 01274 200024 You can drop in at many clinics around Bradford and Airedale

The Trinity Centre Sexual Health Service Trinity Road, off Little Horton Lane, Bradford BD5 0JD (also known as GUM) phone 01274 200024 for an appointment or drop-in between 8.30 am and 12 noon Monday to Friday.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Complaints or suggestions for improvements of all NHS services contact PALS on 01274 237555. They will listen to any difficulties you have met in finding the services you need and help and support you to sort them out.

Bradford Council's Library Service

Information, books, audiotapes CDs and computers with two hours free internet access.

There are libraries in Bradford itself and other main centres.

Visit: www.bradford.gov.uk/information_and_communication/library_and_information_services or call: 01274 433600

General Practice/Doctors' Surgeries

To register with a doctor go to your nearest practice. You can find a list or use an interactive search on www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx



For more information, ask your GP or contact:

Contraception and Sexual Health Clinics: 01274 200024

The Trinity Centre Sexual Health Service: 01274 200024