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 partners is without risk. While women who have sex exclusively with women (WSW) are typically at lower risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than their heterosexual and bisexual counterparts (including HIV [2]), they're still at risk for some infections. As such, practicing safer sex is still a good idea. Read on for more on infections that WSW may be at risk for, the ways in which they are transmitted, and prevention strategies to utilize while still keeping it sexy.

Though it's true that there are a number of STIs that are less common among WSW, sexual contact between female partners is not sans risk. Infections can still be passed in a number of ways, including through skin-to-skin contact, contact with vaginal fluids or menstrual blood, and through shared use of sex toys. STIs that are less likely to be transmitted between female sex partners include gonorrhea [3], hepatitis B [4], syphilis [5], and HIV. It's been noted, though, that WSW who've been diagnosed with any of these less common STIs often have previously had sex with men at some point (especially in their younger years).

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

- Bacterial vaginosis [6]
- Chlamydia [7]
- Genital herpes [8]
- Human papillomavirus (HPV) [9]
- Pubic lice [10]
- Trichomoniasis [11]
List adapted from Womenshealth.gov [12].

With this in mind, it’s wise to consider how you and your partner(s) can protect each other and reduce the risk for infection (as you are doing). Safer sex between females involves many of the same strategies as for any set of partners, and the ideas below can be part of sex without ruining the mood:

- During oral sex, cover the entire vaginal or anal area with a dam (a square of latex), non-microwaveable plastic wrap, or a cut-open condom or latex glove. Use creative means of keeping the latex or wrap in place, such as a garter belt, to leave your hands free to roam. During vulva-to-vulva contact, a similar latex barrier can 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 up the phalanges first is a wise decision. For the penetrating partner, making sure to cover cuts or sores on the hands can also help to reduce risk; this can be done by using latex gloves, condoms, or finger cots. Using lubricant [13] can go a long way to help all involved feel comfortable as well. 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 is not an exhaustive list of all the creative activities you may get into between the sheets. The bottom line here is that you can 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 tool box is having a frank conversation with your partner about STIs, safer sex methods, what behaviors you’re willing and interested in, and whether to get tested. 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 the supplies of your choice and enjoy!

Alice!
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