

## **What does it mean to be a lesbian?**

Lesbians are women who are emotionally, spiritually and sexually attracted to other women. Lesbians may be teachers, doctors, lawyers, police officers, politicians, ministers, movie stars, mothers, nuns, truck drivers, models, athletes. Lesbians are found in all races, religions, ethnicities and socioeconomic classes. Some lesbians are in heterosexual marriages. Some are disabled. Lesbians are young women and old women. Lesbians are everywhere.

## **How do I know if I'm a lesbian?**

During adolescence most young women begin to be aware of sexual feelings. Many young women feel attracted to men. But many other young women feel attracted to other women or to both men and women.

You may notice that you are attracted to other women. You may feel different from your girlfriends, like you don't fit in sometimes. When your girlfriends are checking out boys, you may find yourself checking out girls. Going out with boys may not interest you. You may find yourself wondering, "Why aren't there any men like these terrific women I keep meeting?"

You may also feel confused or unsure about whether or not you're a lesbian. Many adults will tell you that you're too young to call ourselves gay, or that you're going through a phase, or that you don't know what you're talking about. That's their way of avoiding the fact that some women are lesbians or bisexual.

You may feel confused because you're attracted to both men and women. That's okay. Some women have relationships with both men and women throughout their lives. Some may later decide to be exclusively lesbian or heterosexual. The point is, sexuality develops over time. Don't worry if you aren't sure.

## **Am I normal?**

Yes, you are normal. It's perfectly natural for people to be attracted to members of their own sex. But it's not something that's encouraged in our society. Many people push away these feelings because of prejudice against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Most scientific experts agree that a person's sexual orientation is determined at a very young age, maybe even at birth. It's normal and healthy to be yourself, whether you're gay or straight. What's really important is that we learn to like ourselves.

## **What is it like to be a lesbian?**

There's no right way or wrong way to be a lesbian. Because of society's stereotypes about lesbians, you might think you have to be a certain way if you're a lesbian. But lesbians come in all shapes and sizes, from all occupations, and with all levels of education.

Your sexual orientation is only one part of who you are. You probably have hobbies and interests that are the same as your straight friends.

Because of homophobia and prejudice, some people don't accept lesbian, gay and bisexual people. We sometimes suffer from discrimination and violence. That's why there are many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender organizations that work for our civil rights.

### **Who should I tell?**

Coming out is the process of accepting yourself as a lesbian and figuring out how open you want to be about your sexual orientation. Unfortunately not everyone you know will think that your being a lesbian is so great. It's hard to know who can handle the information and give you support. Some friends may accept you. Some may turn away from you or tell other people without your permission. Telling family can be very difficult because while some families are very supportive, others are not; some lesbian, gay, bi, and trans youth have been kicked out of their homes when their parents found out.

It's important to have someone to talk to because it's not normal or healthy for young people to have to keep secret such an important part of their lives.

### **What about sex?**

Deciding whether or not to be sexual with someone is a big decision. You may feel very scared at the thought of having sex with another women. That's OK. Lots of us do, especially if it's our first time.

Women aren't encouraged in our society to talk openly about sex, but it's important that we communicate about what we like and don't like to do sexually, whether we feel ready to have sex or not, and different expectations we may have about the relationship. And it's important to talk about whether we're at risk for HIV, the virus that is thought to cause AIDS, or other sexually transmitted diseases, like herpes.

There are many ways that lesbians can be sexual with each other. We can give each other pleasure by holding, kissing, hugging, stroking, stimulating each other's genitals with our tongues and hands, inserting our fingers into each other's vaginas, rubbing our bodies together to stimulate each other, and anything else we want to do. We can use our imaginations!

### **What about AIDS?**

All of us should know about HIV, the virus believed to be the cause of AIDS - how it's transmitted and how we can prevent ourselves from becoming infected. You and your partner should discuss your risk factors for HIV infection and decide what, if any, safer sex methods you should use.

Lesbians who are at risk are those who:

- Share needles if using IV drugs.
- Have vaginal intercourse with men without using condoms. (It's fairly common for young lesbians to occasionally have sexual contact with men.)
- Have oral sex with an infected women without the use of a barrier to protect against infected vaginal secretions or menstrual blood.

Safer sex for lesbians includes:

- Use of a dental dam for oral-vaginal and oral-anal stimulation. A dental dam is a piece of latex about 5 inches square designed for use in dental surgery. They are available at dental or medical supply stores.
- Use of surgical gloves when sticking your fingers into your partner's vagina or anus, especially if you have tiny cuts or rashes on your hands.
- Not sharing sex toys

### **How do I learn to like myself?**

All people have a right to feel good about themselves. We're all valuable human beings. Developing self-esteem is very important. It's hard for gay and lesbian young people to feel good about ourselves because all around us are people who believe that we're sick or perverted or destined to live unhappy lives.

When we think we have to hide who we really are, we may feel isolated, fearful, and depressed, especially if we've had no one to talk to about our sexual orientation.

More and more, we as young lesbians are learning to like who we are. It helps to read good books about lesbians - books that have accurate information and are written about lesbians who are leading fulfilling lives. The NU LGBT Resource Center has a lending library with many good books for you. It also helps to meet other lesbians because then we find out that lesbian and bisexual women are as diverse as any other group of people.

It can help to say to yourself, "I'm a lesbian and I'm okay." Remember: it's normal and natural to be a lesbian, just like it's normal and natural for some people to be heterosexual.

Credits

From the UCLA LGBT Campus Resource Center ([www.lgbt.ucla.edu/](http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/))

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