



# Campus Women



## Lesbians and aids -What are the Risks?

Lesbian sex has been absent from most discussions of AIDS since the epidemic began. In talking to a number of women about this fact, I found that the subject of whether lesbians are at risk or not is quite controversial. According to Taylor Wilcox, AIDS line supervisor at MAP, "Lesbians are invisible in our culture and are even more difficult to evaluate, there are four myths surrounding lesbians:

They don't prostitute  
They don't use IV drugs  
They don't have sex with men  
They don't get AIDS

The general opinion, therefore, is that they're not at risk, that lesbianism is the safest sex around.

So, what are the facts? One reason for the controversy appears to be that there's really no data to go by to substantiate whether lesbians are at risk or not. There are no government studies and only one study by a major research institution on lesbian transmission. The Centre for Disease Control does not include woman-to-woman transmission in its breakdown of AIDS cases, despite the fact that at least three cases in lesbians have been reported worldwide in medical journals. Of eight lesbian cases reported to the CDC, four were attributed to "unknown" causes, another four to "immigrant status". Doctors interviewing female AIDS patients often fail to even ask about sex with women. An informal survey conducted via the grapevine in the lesbian community, counted about 400 lesbians with AIDS as of last fall. The CDC has been negligent. Of nearly 5,000 American women who had contracted AIDS as of June, 1988, 101 reported sexual contact with other women. So, if 101 lesbians have AIDS, it's likely a much larger number are infected. At one clinic in Manhattan, 30 lesbian clients have tested positive.

Other possible routes of infection, of course, are IV drug use, sex with men and artificial insemination. In a recent Kinsey Institute study, 46 percent of women who defined themselves as lesbians had sex with men at least once since 1980. When women who consider

themselves lesbian do have sex with a man, often it will be with one who is gay or bisexual - increasing their risk. Many had sex with men before they came out as a lesbian.

At Risk Factors for Lesbians Are: Sharing needles  
Having had sex with men at risk sometime over the last eight years  
Having used semen for artificial insemination from a donor who is HIV infected  
Having received a blood transfusion or blood products infected with HIV before 1985  
Having sexual contact with women who have the virus  
The greatest risk factor for lesbians is the use of IV drugs. Most lesbians who are infected fall into this category. This is a strong reason for recognizing substance abuse among lesbians and advocating an educational program stressing the dangers of HIV transmission through the sharing of needles. All forms of substance abuse, including alcohol, increase risk. It is thought that 25-35% of lesbians are chemically dependent. Drugs and alcohol are by nature immunosuppressive.

## Artificial Insemination and Lesbians

In 1985, four Australian women who had been artificially inseminated were found to have antibodies to HIV. They had all been inseminated from a donor who was infected.

This is a consideration for any lesbian who is considering getting pregnant. If using a sperm bank, she should ask if the donor's blood has been properly tested for HIV. She may want to insist on frozen sperm again, 6 months later. (It sometimes takes this long, or longer, for the antibodies to show up in the bloodstream).

Women doing self-insemination need to be careful in choosing a donor. In the past, women have often used gay or bisexual men. It's important to study the donor's medical, social and sexual background. One solution is to ask him to be tested, have the sperm frozen at a sperm bank and then wait 6 months and ask him to be tested again. If the second test is also negative, she can go ahead and use the sperm. (How