Lesbian Teens

What is sexual orientation?

- Sexuality is a natural part of every human being. Sexual orientation is about the direction of a person's emotional connections, attractions, and sometimes about whom they have sexual activity with. Attractions to people of the same sex (gay, lesbian, homosexual), to the opposite sex (straight, heterosexual), and to both sexes (bisexual) are all part of human sexuality.

What is a lesbian?

- Lesbians are women who are sexually attracted to other women. For some, the attraction may lead to dating and possibly engaging in sexual activity with another woman. Some women form lifelong relationships with each other, which may include having and raising children and establishing a family.

How common is it for girls to identify as lesbian?

- One in ten girls is sexually attracted to other girls.
- Often, young women are not sure whether they are lesbian or not, but they are aware of their interest and attraction to other women. This can be very confusing in a world that stresses attraction to the opposite sex.
- A young woman may take many years before she feels certain that she is lesbian. She may date young men during this period of uncertainty, and may even have sexual relationships with them.
- Early same-sex attraction does not necessarily mean a person is lesbian or gay.

When does a woman know that she is a lesbian?

- Generally, teens develop an inner sense of their sexual orientation during and after puberty.
- Some lesbian women say they knew they were attracted to women in junior high school. Others say they knew at an earlier time.

What causes someone to be a lesbian?

- No one really knows what causes a particular sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is the result of biologic, hereditary, and environmental factors.

What can you do if you think you are a lesbian?

- You need to be patient. It is healthy and normal for teens and young adults to question their sexual orientation.
- It is important for you to know you are not alone. Many teens struggle with questions and feelings about their sexuality.
- You should know that whatever your sexual orientation, you are normal.
- Information can be obtained from supportive sources.
- You should take care of your body and, if you are sexually active, you should practice safe sex.
- You should be aware of your feelings and try to find answers to questions from reliable sources.

What are the major concerns for lesbians?

- Some schools do not teach about sexual orientation because of objections from some religious and political groups.
- Laws still forbid lesbians from marrying each other in most states or from serving openly in the military.
- Few states protect lesbians from job discrimination or count hate crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Because of these circumstances, many lesbians initially hide their sexual orientation.
- Although increasing, there are still few lesbians portrayed in popular media and, thus, few lesbian role models for youth.
- These factors can cause distress and isolation during adolescence, and lead to increased rates of substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs), school dropouts, individuals who run away from home, and depression.
- Lesbian and gay teens who do not feel supported by adults in their homes and schools are more likely to experience depression.

How should lesbian teens take care of their bodies?

- You should see your health care providers regularly for routine examinations, tests, and immunizations.
- You should have your first Pap test at age 21 years.
- You should protect yourself against sexually transmitted diseases (STD) if you have sex with males or females.

- If you are worried that you or your partner has an STD, both of you should see a doctor for treatment. Sexually transmitted diseases can be passed from one woman to another. (See the "Sexually Transmitted Diseases" fact sheet for more information.)
- Sexually active teens should practice safe sex. It is important to:
  - — Talk about safe sex before having sexual contact with a partner.
  - — Avoid mixing sex with the use of drugs or alcohol.
  - — Use barriers, such as condoms or dental dams, between all organs, body openings, body fluids, devices, or sex toys during sexual activity.
  - — Avoid getting menstrual blood or vaginal fluids into cuts or sores.
  - — Clean sex toys before and after personal use.
  - — Use birth control pills, contraceptive injections (shots), the contraceptive transdermal patch, the intrauterine device, or the vaginal contraceptive ring plus a condom if you sometimes have sex with guys.
  - — Realize that you can be at risk of STDs even if you only have sexual contact with women.

How should lesbian teens take care of their feelings?

- It is sometimes tough to make it through the teen years. Teens begin to think about feeling physically or emotionally attracted to other people, sometimes of the same sex, sometimes of the opposite sex.
- You need to be reassured that every sexual orientation is healthy and normal.
- Young women who begin to realize they are lesbian may be afraid to tell family members, friends, or doctors.
- You should get counseling if you feel troubled about your sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual behavior, or any other aspect of your life.
- If you feel lonely, sad, or scared a lot of the time, you should know you are not alone and should get help as soon as possible from a health care professional or a women's center.

For More Information

We have provided information on the following organizations and web sites because they have information that may be of interest to our readers. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) does not necessarily endorse the views expressed or the facts presented by these organizations or on these web sites. Further, ACOG does not endorse any commercial products that may be advertised or available from these organizations or on these web sites.

Advocates for Youth
Telephone: (202) 419-3420
Web: www.advocatesforyouth.org

American Academy of Pediatrics
Telephone: (847) 434-4000
Web: www.aap.org

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
Telephone: (202) 638-5577 or (800) 673-8444
Web: www.acog.org

American Psychological Association
Telephone: (202) 336-5500 or (800) 374-2721
Web: www.apa.org

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)
Telephone: (415) 861-5437
Web: www.colage.org

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association
Telephone: (415) 255-4547
Web: www.glma.org

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)
Telephone: (212) 727-0135
Web: www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html

GLBT National Help Center
Telephone: (415) 355-0003
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline: (888) THE-GLNH (843-4564)
Web: www.glnh.org/index2.html

Lambda GLBT Community Centers
Telephone: (206) 350-4297
Web: www.lambda.org

National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Centers
Telephone: (202) 824-0450
Web: www.lgbtcenters.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
Telephone: (202) 393-5177
Web: www.thetaskforce.org

National Youth Advocacy Coalition
Telephone: (202) 319-7596 or (800) 541-6922
Web: www.nyacyouth.org

OutProud
Web: www.outproud.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
Telephone: (202) 467-8180
Web: www.pflag.org

PlanetOut
Telephone: (415) 834-6500
Web: www.planetout.com

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)
Telephone: (212) 819-9770
Web: www.siecus.org

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada
Telephone: (800) 561-2416 or (613) 730-4192
Web: http://sogc.medical.org/index_e.asp
www.sexualityandu.ca/home_e.aspx

The Trevor Project
Telephone: (310) 271-8845
The Trevor Helpline: (866) 4-U-TREVOR (488-7386)
Web: http://thetrevorproject.org/home.aspx

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