

Lesbians and gay women need to get tested, too!

About me

I identify as a gay woman and sometimes as a lesbian, but most often I'm just gay. In my community I'm known as a stud, which is a masculine-presenting woman.

Getting an STI screening

My girlfriend at the time, she made me go. Before I got tested, I didn't really think of it as a big deal. I'm a lesbian, so I didn't know that you could pass stuff easily. I didn't think it was possible to pass STIs (sexually transmitted infections) through oral sex, but my girlfriend told me you could. And since I don't want to use dental dams, we decided to get tested.

She said "We need to get checked together." She said we're starting a brand new relationship, and she wanted to start brand new. At first I just did it because I wanted to get with her! <Laughs>

Going to the clinic

We decided to go to Planned Parenthood to get tested. Unfortunately we found out that it would take three months to get in (so plan ahead!). They transferred us to another local health clinic that was able to get us in after a month. When we got there we told them that we wanted to get tested for STIs. The clinician named off a list of STIs, and I said just test us for "the basics."

They asked us if we wanted to get tested for HIV, and I said no. I thought that they would have to take blood for HIV testing, but I found out later that now they don't have to take blood. They can just use a swab in your mouth. (If we had gone to Planned Parenthood they would have done a finger prick.) They didn't explain that not getting blood drawn was an option. So we didn't get HIV testing, but we got everything else.

They handed us a packet, and we had to answer a questionnaire. It asked about our sexual history. On the form, they only asked about anal sex if you're a man, not a woman. I thought that was kind of messed up – some women have anal sex! For women, it asked if I had had oral sex or vaginal sex in the last 6 months.

The examination

I went in, and I had to take my clothes off. The robe that they gave me at first was too small, and my bootie was hanging all out. I don't think they have robes for bigger people, which is kind of out of order.

To start things off, the woman doing the exam asked me some questions about what I do, and that made me feel more comfortable. I kind of forgot I was there. Then she began the exam, and my nerves kind of came back, but she told me everything she was going to do before we did it.

We began with a breast exam, which made me a little uncomfortable because I don't really like people touching my breasts, not even my girlfriend. She told me that she was just checking for lumps. She told me that she wasn't going to touch my nipples, but just around them. Her hands were cold. <Laughs> The breast exam only took about a minute most. I did not expect that.

Just by her saying what she was going to do, and also telling me what she wasn't going to do, she made me feel better. I could kind of brace myself. The one thing that was kind of weird, though, is what she said after I took my binder off. ("Binding" is where you use certain clothes or materials to flatten your breasts to make them look smaller or to make your chest more male-looking.) She said something like "Your breasts are way larger than they look with your shirt on."

My goal is to eventually get top surgery, but because of financial stuff...it's not going to happen any time soon, you know? So that was one of the negative parts. Why would she think that would be a good comment? It would be good for medical professionals to know that if someone is wearing a binder they may not want comments made about their breasts.

Getting a pap smear

After the breast exam the clinician had me lie down on the table. Then she put my feet up in the stirrups. Time for my pelvic exam and pap smear! It felt like I was having a baby - my feet were all spread out and my stuff was all up in the air. It was definitely a different experience! <Laughs>

She placed her hand on my stomach, and then took out this small metal tool, which is called a speculum. It looked like a little metal dildo when it was closed. The speculum is used to widen the opening of the vagina so the doctor can get a better look at your cervix. I was kind of intimidated because I didn't know how far she was going to open it.

She made a comment, like "You kind of look like a virgin." I told her that I don't have a lot of sex with penetration, and she said "yeah, I can tell." So that was also kind of awkward.

But she told me everything she was going to do, and she put the speculum in some warm water so that it wasn't as cold. It was a little uncomfortable when she inserted it into my vagina, somewhat like putting in a tampon. I don't know if it would be more comfortable for folks who have more penetrative sex, but for me it was a little uncomfortable.

After she inserted it she slowly screwed it open. Then she took this long stick - it looked like a really long Q-tip - and she just swabbed it against my cervix, which I didn't really feel at all. And that was it.

One of the reasons I waited this long to get a pap smear is because I wasn't having vaginal sex. I had stopped having sex with boys when I was 16, and I hadn't had very much, so I didn't think I needed one.

I still think you should do it, though, because she told me she was checking for cervical cancer.

Finishing up the examination

She told me that she was going to look around the outside of my vagina, around the vulva, and in my pubes for bumps, secretions, and anything like that. She used a little flashlight to get a better look. It was a little weird but once I reminded myself that she was a doctor and she's seen lots of these, I got over it.

When she was down there looking, she was giving encouraging statements, like "it looks really good in there." And that made me feel better. Before scheduling the exam I hadn't really felt like I was doing any risky behavior, but still the thought of getting checked had me worried. I think everyone does that. Even if you think you've been safe, in your head you're going over every person you've been with wondering, "What about her?"

And that was the end of the physical exam. She said "All done, you did a really good job. If you were at a regular doctor, you'd get a sucker." <Laughs>

Then she told me that it would take 7 to 10 days to hear back, but they called me after like three days. They told me I had to come in and get my results, and I asked them to read them over the phone. But they told me they couldn't do that. I went in and my results were all negative.

Overall I know that they tested for gonorrhea, Chlamydia, HPV, and anything unusual. I thought maybe they would test for herpes but they only really do a test if there are visible sores. I'm going to ask about this the next time I get tested.

Advice for other youth

First of all, for lesbians and gay women: You need to go. Don't think that just because you're not having sex with men doesn't mean you don't need to go. We can pass stuff to each other.

I am happy I did it. I am going to get checked again soon. I am going to get an HIV test now that I know they don't have to draw blood. <Laughs>

I think we sometimes have this fear that the people doing the test are going to be ice cold, but they are really warm. They try to make you comfortable.

If I had to give tips to clinic people, I think you should ask people's comfort levels with you touching them, or different parts of their body. The person I had was so nice, and I told myself that she wasn't trying to make me feel bad - I don't think she was being malicious or anything. If I went and did it again, I think I would like to give her a heads up not to make comments about my breasts. Other people might hear that and decide to not get tested again.

Discussion Questions

1. Alix previously believed that lesbians didn't need to get tested because they "don't have sex with men." How common do you think this belief is among gay and lesbian women? How common do you think this belief is among the general public? What are some ways you could encourage a lesbian friend to get tested?
2. What did you think about the clinician's comments about Alix's breasts? How did you feel while reading those remarks? What, if anything, could Alix have said in that situation? How would you respond to a health care professional who made a similar remark to you?
3. What are your beliefs on getting tested? How do they compare and contrast to Alix's beliefs? If a current or future partner asked you to get tested, would you? Explain why or why not.
4. Did this article change your views about getting tested? Why or why not?
5. What surprised you or what was something new you learned from this article?