

## For lesbian women

Many of the emotional issues experienced by lesbians at diagnosis are the same as those of heterosexual women. However, lesbian women live in a world where lesbians are largely "invisible". This is especially true for rural lesbians. Therefore additional issues may impact negatively on your emotional well being at this time. Because of past negative experiences with the health system, you may be reluctant to seek out information and assistance from health professionals. Although this is understandable, by not accessing health services you may be putting your health at additional risk.

Research shows that, in general, lesbian women, compared to heterosexual women, experience higher levels of stress and reduced social support from their families of origin. Lesbian women are also known to be at higher risk of some gynaecological cancers and miss out on screening procedures that can detect cervical cancer at an earlier stage. However, it is also true that lesbian women diagnosed with cancer report greater satisfaction with support from their partner, and higher levels of communication about their fears and difficulties than heterosexual women. While some lesbian women are estranged from their family of origin, lesbian women with cancer often find support from a "family of friends" within their lesbian community.

While research reports make general statements about a large number of women, it is important to recognize the diversity of lesbian women's experience. You may be "out" to everyone, "out" in some contexts but not others, or be very private about your sexual identity. This is a matter of personal choice, and will depend very much on the degree to which you fear other people's responses will be unsupportive or even harmful. While many lesbians struggle with the decision "to tell or not tell" their health care team when diagnosed with cancer, if you want to have your partner or family with you through this journey, it is often best to be perfectly clear with them about who is your partner if you have one, and who make up "your family".