



Lesbian Women and Sexual Health: The Social Construction of Risk and Susceptibility

R Dennis Shelby, Kathleen Dolan

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Interviewer: Where did you find out how to have safe lesbian sex?

Val: I found out in jail.

Why do so many lesbian women engage in sexual behavior that puts their health, even their lives, at risk? Many know they're at risk, yet somehow feel safe enough to behave as if there is no reason to practice safe sex. *Lesbian Women and Sexual Health: The Social Construction of Risk and Susceptibility* examines how lesbian women perceive their level of risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It describes how their perceptions of risk and susceptibility are shaped by factors such as sexual identity, cultural themes, and community knowledge—and how those perceptions impact on the very real HIV/STI risks that lesbian women face.

The genesis of *Lesbian Women and Sexual Health: The Social Construction of Risk and Susceptibility* lies in Kathleen Dolan's exploratory study of this under-researched area, in which 162 structured interviews and 70 in-depth interviews were conducted with women who self-identify as lesbians. What these women have to say will inform, educate, and probably surprise you. Tables and figures make complex data easy to access and understand.

Lesbian women construct and label their identities and actions in complex ways that may lead to risky behavior. In the words of the women surveyed—and in Dr. Dolan's insightful commentary—this book explores the ways in which lesbian women construct their perceptions of risk and susceptibility to seek answers to questions that include:

- Do many lesbian women see themselves, to an extent, as immune to HIV contraction?
- How does their self-constructed sense of risk and susceptibility lead to making dangerous choices?
- Why, in spite of their professed willingness to engage in protective actions, do many lesbians not actually do so?
- Why do many lesbian women, and some of the health care professionals who serve them, feel that pap smears are not necessary for women who have sex only with other women—and what are the consequences of this opinion?
- What is the relationship between drug/alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors in lesbian women?

Lesbian Women and Sexual Health: The Social Construction of Risk and Susceptibility is an important resource for women's/lesbian health advocates, health care professionals, and courses in gay/women's/medical studies. It addresses gaps in the existing research to enhance our understanding of the physical and mental health status of lesbian women, of risk factors and protective actions regarding HIV and STIs, and of the conditions for which protective actions actually reduce risk. Use it to update your knowledge of this under-studied area at the intersection of physical, emotional, and sexual health.

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