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HEALTH MATTERS

Health Matters is one of a series of 5 brochures for people working in the sex industry. The others cover *Security, Law, Money, and Dancing Matters*.

Health Matters covers:

- ★ Some of the most common health concerns that came up in interviews with workers, and
- ★ Tips for how to deal with them.



*Sex Trade Advocacy and Research
Défense du travail du sexe et projet de recherche*

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Information in the brochures comes from research conducted with escorts, masseuses, street workers, dancers, and doms in Toronto and Montreal from 2001 to 2003. Although the information in this brochure largely reflects the experiences of women, it may also be useful to men or TS/TG workers.

Select the tips that work best for you or modify them to meet your needs.

STAYING HEALTHY

Common complaints are that night shifts can make it difficult to get enough rest and that the readily available 'fast food' isn't good for your health.

TIPS for looking after your health:

- To help avoid infections:
 - Wash your hands or use hand sanitizers between dates.
 - Use non-perfumed, non-alcohol-based wipes or soap to wash your genitals.
 - Clean your work supplies (toys, towels, sheets, massage table, costumes) regularly.
 - Clean or cover anything that your genitals touch. Health Canada recommends bleach and water solution, but bleach fades colours. Try vinegar and water as an alternative.
 - Shop around for gloves you like and wear them:
 - If you have a cut on your hand or finger.
 - If you can't access soap and water.
 - Especially for multiple sexual acts with multiple partners.
 - Protect cuts on your skin by cleaning and covering with a bandage (fabric or liquid).
 - Use your own toothbrush, razor, tweezers, underwear and cosmetics.
 - If you douche, keep this for the end of your work and limit how often.
 - Get immunized against hepatitis A and B, tetanus and flu.
 - If you work on the streets and have no fixed place to stay, take a shower and a nap when in a hotel.
- Care for your breasts:
 - A monthly breast check may find lumps. If you find something unusual consult a doctor immediately.
 - If you decide to get implants, talk to others who have them and do some research.
 - If you have large breasts wear a support bra when you aren't working to prevent back, shoulder, and neck pain.
- Find a doctor you're comfortable with or a local walk-in clinic where you can go if you get sick and for your annual physical. Get a breast check, pap smear (prostate exam for men) and a test for Sexually Transmitted

OTHER HEALTH CONCERNS

This brochure only covers some of the main concerns of sex workers. Other health concerns include: working while menstruating or pregnant, reproductive health, birth control, exposure to tobacco smoke and car fumes. If you want more information on the topics covered in this brochure or other health issues, Stella, a Montreal organization run by and for sex workers has excellent health and safety tips on their website and in their **XXX Guide**. You can find it at: www.chezstella.org or by calling 514-285-8889. Or check the yellow pages under **Health** for organizations in your city.

This brochure is not meant to replace medical tests, diagnoses, advice or treatment. If you have concerns about your health, see a doctor. Local sex worker organizations can often recommend health care professionals who will provide quality service and who understand the demands of your work.

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- There's no soap and water or other way to wash up.
- You have open cuts or sores on your hands or fingers.
- Inspect your client before deciding what services to provide.
 - Look for unusual marks, sores, scabs, discharges or anything that moves.
 - Adjust your services based on what you find. For example, a condom or gloves may be necessary.
- Get checked for STIs on a regular basis, not just once a year.
- If you suspect you've been in contact with an STI, get tested as soon as possible. Anonymous testing for HIV is available and recommended.

ABOUT CONDOMS

- Latex or polyurethane condoms are your best protection.
- Most condom boxes have basic information about how to use them. A few extra tips:
 - Check the expiration date.
 - Squeeze or pinch air out of the tip while rolling the condom over an **erect** penis.
 - Make sure the condom stays on – hold it in place, especially during withdrawal.
 - Use a water-based lube and avoid nonoxynol-9.
 - Bring your own condoms. If a client wants to use his own, check the date and make sure the packet is sealed.
 - Flavored condoms are good for oral sex but not for fucking, they may cause yeast infections.
 - If a condom breaks, call your local sexual health or STI clinic for advice on emergency birth control and STI/HIV testing and prevention.
- Condoms protect against most STIs; but crabs, herpes, warts (caused by the human papilloma virus, or HPV), sores and other lesions may be on part of the body that can't be covered with a condom.

WHEN YOU NEED A DOCTOR

In a good quality health service you are treated with respect and not discriminated against. Don't accept being treated badly or not being listened to. To find a good doctor, ask around, check with sex worker organizations and other workers. Also try free clinics, AIDS service organizations and community health centres or walk-in clinics, and interview potential doctors.

If you have health problems that you can't explain or that don't go away, or if you think you are pregnant or might have an STI, you **need** to consult a doctor.

- Infections (STIs) as part of your physical.
- If you're pregnant or considering a pregnancy there are many issues you will need to think about. This is a good time to consult a doctor and a sex worker organization.

TIPS for getting rest, good food, and staying comfortable at work:

- Take high energy healthy snacks with you to work (e.g., power bars, dried fruit and nuts, meal replacement drinks).
- If you're working the street:
 - Find an all-night deli, convenience store or gas station with a deli section for buying snacks.
 - Dress warmly in winter.
 - Keep your feet dry.
- If you're working inside, find a place to keep your food or use an insulated lunch bag with an ice pack to keep it fresh.
- Make time to sit down.
- It may be difficult, but it's important to budget time for yourself, for sleep, for friends, for fun, and to do what makes you happy outside of work.
- Sports, exercise, and especially stretching can help keep you in shape and reduce stress and injury.

AVOIDING ACCIDENTS AND INJURIES

Sex workers frequently reported *foot, leg, knee and back pain; falls, strains, sprains and breaks*. These were often caused by wearing high heels, tight shoes, from being on their feet or bending over a lot. In addition to pain and discomfort, accidents and injuries may result in lost income.

IF YOU'RE CONCERNED about accidents or injuries:

- Wear the best quality shoes you can find and make sure they fit properly.
- Try insoles, arch supports and baby powder for greater comfort.
- To avoid falls or sprains, watch for holes or cracks in the pavement or floor.
- If you work inside, make sure massage tables, stages, beds, poles, or other furniture or equipment are in good repair.
- When taking breaks or during down time put your feet up, kick off your shoes, stretch, and massage your feet.
- Remember, working through pain can make an injury worse.

STRESS, FEAR AND STIGMA

Living with the fear of being assaulted, stigmatized, arrested or harassed can wear you down.

If stress, fear or stigma is part of your life:

- Pay attention to your own values and seek out like-minded and supportive people. It is probably the most important thing to do for your well-being and mental health.
- Establish personal boundaries and preferences for:
 - Where and when you work.
 - The services you'll provide.
 - The personal information you're willing to share.
 - The amount of emotional intimacy you have with clients and friends.
 - Who and what you tell about your work.
- Talk to someone you trust to help you make decisions about boundaries and limits. This can also help if you are feeling empty, depressed, alone or unhappy.
- Listen to yourself. If you feel you should change your ways of working or take a break, do so.
- Remember, as your circumstances change you may want to revisit some of your decisions about boundaries and limits.
- Money problems, fear of arrest and safety concerns are major stressors. See *Money, Security and Law Matters* for some ideas that may help you deal with these.

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

Like anyone else, some sex workers use drugs or alcohol for relaxation, recreation, or to manage work-related stress. Depending on the quantity you use, develop strategies for staying alert and in control.

THINGS TO CONSIDER if you use drugs:

- When getting a new supply, or if you haven't used in a long time, try a small amount to make sure it's safe.
- If you use needles:
 - Use a new one each time.
 - Use rubbing alcohol to disinfect the injection spot.
- If you snort drugs, use your own tube.
- Whatever way you do drugs, it's better not to share paraphernalia.

- Your problems may increase if you are carrying drugs and questioned by police.

If you have a client who uses:

- Assess the situation and consider your comfort and safety.
- If he seems out of control, refuse or leave the date.
- If using drugs or alcohol with a client, consider the safety and legal issues. It's safest to bring your own supply, but if you have drugs on you police can charge you with possession and/or trafficking. The next best thing is to make sure you're both using the same supply.

'Rape' drugs:

Many women (and men) have been raped or assaulted because someone slipped them a rape drug in a drink.

- Only accept a drink served by the wait-staff or bartender.
- Don't put your drink down or leave it behind when you go someplace.
- If after one drink you feel like you've had 10, alert staff, a co-worker, or someone you trust and have them take you to a hospital. If you've been slipped a rape drug, you will lose consciousness very quickly.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS (STIs) AND HIV

There's a myth that sex workers are especially at risk for STIs and HIV. The reality is that most sex workers are better informed about STIs and how to protect themselves than those who don't work in the sex industry.

SOME INFORMATION about STIs:

- STIs can be transmitted through blood, body fluid or skin-to-skin contact.
- Blood and fluids don't have to be visible to transmit STIs.
- Most people who are infected have no symptoms and don't know they're infected.
- STIs can be transmitted and can damage your health even without symptoms.
- Most STIs are easily treated, but if they're left untreated they will escalate.
- Cuts and skin irritation can be a way for STIs to get into your body. To avoid cuts and skin irritations:
 - Use mouthwash to freshen your breath before work and save brushing and flossing for after work.
 - Shave your genital area after work.
- Protect your hands with gloves, especially if:
 - Performing multiple sexual acts with multiple partners.