

NATIONAL LGBT HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK

march 12–18, 2006 | www.lgbthealth.net

LESBIANS & BISEXUAL WOMEN Fact Sheet

OWN YOUR HEALTH. GET CHECKED OUT.

Healthy communities require healthy individuals. It is time for all us to get checked out and to get and stay healthy.

It can be hard to talk about our intimate life with anyone. To make sure we stay healthy, we need to help our health care providers help us by talking openly and honestly about our lives and who we are. Coming out is crucial to helping our health care providers help keep us healthy. We need to come out to our providers about our sexual orientation or gender identity. We need to let them know when we are fighting depression, challenging substance use, and trying to manage our sexual health.

Knowledge is powerful tool in keeping us healthy. Below are six important topics that we all need to talk about with our health care providers:

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- Mental Health (including **depression** and **anxiety** screening)
- Sexual Health (including **STD** and **HIV** screening)
- Substance Use (including **tobacco** and **alcohol**)
- Heart Health
- Fitness (including **diet** and **exercise**)
- Domestic Violence and Safety

More information on the six important topics we all should talk about with our health care providers

Mental Health (including depression and anxiety screening)

LGBT people appear to experience higher levels of depression and anxiety than the general population. The problem may be more severe for those LGBT people who remain in the closet or who do not have adequate social supports. Adolescents and young adults may be at particularly high risk of suicide because of these concerns.

- *Talk to your provider about any depression, anxiety or suicidal thoughts that you have.*

Sexual Health (including STD and HIV screening)

Talking to your health care provider about your sexual health is an important part of maintaining your whole health. Regular screening for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is important part of good sexual health. This includes STD infections for which effective treatment is available (syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, pubic lice, and others), and those for which no cure is available (HIV, Hepatitis A, B, or C virus, Human Papilloma Virus, etc.). There is absolutely no doubt that safe sex reduces the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, and prevention of these infections through safe sex is key.

- *Talk to your provider about your STD screenings and how to protect yourself and others from STDs*

Substance Use (including tobacco and alcohol)

Research indicates that illicit drugs may be used more often among LGBT people than heterosexuals. These include a number of substances ranging from amyl nitrate ("poppers"), to marijuana, Ecstasy, and methamphetamines. There may be added stressors in lives of LGBT people from homophobic discrimination to varying degrees of social support that contribute to higher substance use.

- *Talk to your provider about your substance use habits*

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Alcohol

Although recent studies have improved our understanding of alcohol use in the LGBT communities, it is still thought that members of the LGBT communities may have higher rates of alcohol dependence and abuse than their straight counterparts. One drink daily may not adversely affect health, however alcohol-related illnesses can occur with low levels of consumption.

- *Talk to your provider about your alcohol consumption*

Tobacco

A recent study found that nearly 40 percent of lesbian and bisexual girls reported that they smoked weekly compared to only 6 percent of heterosexual girls. Additional studies note that gay and bisexual men may use tobacco at much higher rates than straight men, reaching nearly 50 percent in several studies. Tobacco-related health problems include lung disease and lung cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and a whole host of other serious problems. In addition, smoking increases the risk of blood clots for lesbian, bi and trans women taking estrogen—blood clots can stop the blood flow within your legs, lungs, brain (stroke) or heart (heart attack). All LGBT people should be screened for and offered culturally sensitive prevention and cessation programs for tobacco use.

- *Talk to your doctor about getting help to stop smoking*

Heart Health

Heart health is important for all people, including LGBT community members. Smoking and obesity are the most prevalent risk factors for heart disease among lesbians and bisexual women. Similarly, smoking is an important risk factor for gay and bisexual men. Additionally, HIV infection and HIV drug medications may also increase risk for heart disease. Everyone should get an annual clinical exam where blood pressure is checked, cholesterol is measured, diabetes is diagnosed, and exercise is discussed. Preventing heart disease, which is a

leading cause of death for both women and men, should be paramount to every clinical visit.

- *Talk to your provider about heart disease prevention*

Fitness (including diet and exercise)

Research confirms that lesbians have higher body mass than heterosexual women. Obesity is associated with higher rates of heart disease, cancers, and premature death. What lesbians need is competent advice about healthy living and healthy eating, as well as healthy exercise. Problems with body image are more common among gay men than their straight counterparts, and gay men are much more likely to experience an eating disorder such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa. While regular exercise is very good for cardiovascular health and in other areas, too much of a good thing can be harmful. The use of substances such as anabolic steroids and certain supplements can adversely affect health. At the opposite end of the spectrum, overweight and obesity are problems that also affect a large subset of the gay community. This can cause a number of health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

- *Talk to your provider about your diet and fitness regimen*

Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence and Safety

Gay and bisexual men experience abuse in intimate partner relationships at a rate of 2 in 5, a rate comparable to that of domestic violence experienced by heterosexual women. Studies of lesbians have found that 47% had experienced repeated acts of violence and that 41% had been abused in at least one relationship with another woman. A survey of transgender and intersex individuals in one city found that 50% had been raped or assaulted by a romantic partner, though only 62% of these individuals (31% of the total) identified themselves as survivors of domestic violence when asked. For more information contact the National Coalition of Anti-violence Projects: www.ncavp.org

- *Talk to your provider about any violence in your life*

More Information on the Important Topics for Lesbians and Bisexual Women

Breast Health

Lesbians have the richest concentration of risk factors for this cancer than any subset of women. Combine this with the fact that many lesbians over 40 do not get routine mammograms, do breast self-exams, or have a clinical breast exam, and the cancer may not be diagnosed early when it is most curable.

➤ *Talk with your provider about mammograms and other screenings for breast cancer.*

Gynecological Health

Lesbians have higher risks for some of the gynecologic cancers. What they may not know is that having a yearly exam by a gynecologist can significantly facilitate early diagnosis associated with higher rates of curability if they ever develop. An annual exam screens for HPV and cervical cancer and includes a clinical breast exam; make sure to also talk to your provider about whether additional STD screenings are right for you.

➤ *Talk to your provider about an annual gynecological exam*

Bone Health

The rates and risks of osteoporosis among lesbians have not been well characterized yet. Calcium and weight-bearing exercise as well as the avoidance of tobacco and alcohol are the mainstays of prevention. Getting bone density tests every few years to see if medication is needed to prevent fracture is also important.

➤ *Talk to your provider about bone density testing*

HPV Prevention

Research indicates that lesbians and bisexual women are at risk for genital HPV. By age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired genital HPV infection. Unfortunately, many lesbians and bisexual women do not receive adequate pap test screening. A Pap test can detect pre-cancerous and cancerous cells on the cervix. Regular Pap testing and careful medical follow-up, with treatment if necessary, can help ensure that pre-cancerous changes in the cervix caused by HPV infection do not develop into life threatening cervical cancer. All women should receive regular pap test screening.

➤ *Talk with your provider about screening and treatment for HPV*