

Being Healthy

We all deserve to be healthy, regardless of our age, race, income, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Being healthy means taking care of our physical, emotional, sexual, psychological and spiritual needs.

For bisexuals and people who have sex with women and men, this can be a challenge given the stress of dealing with prejudice and discrimination.

But being bisexual is a wonderful, positive experience for many people and sexual orientation can be a source of pride and celebration.

Many people get healthier after coming out as they feel more in touch with who they really are and more in control of their lives.

Some things that can help you to be healthy include:

- ✦ Accepting and loving yourself for who you are.
- ✦ Coming out if you feel safe and comfortable.
- ✦ Finding personal strengths, other people, and activities that make you feel good about yourself.
- ✦ Connecting with others who support you in the bisexual and queer communities.
- ✦ Figuring out what may be stressful for you and learning the best ways to deal with stress.
- ✦ Learning about your body so that you know what to do to take care of yourself.

Getting Good Health Care

For bisexuals and people who have sex with women and men, getting good health care can be hard. Health care providers may be biphobic or they may not know much about your health concerns. This can make it tough to come out to your health care provider, and some bisexual people may just avoid seeking health care altogether. But it is important to get regular check-ups and to get professional help when something is wrong. Here are some suggestions to improve the quality of your health care:

- ✦ Ask LGBTT friends about their health care providers, or check local queer newspapers and community directories for advice.
- ✦ Visit potential providers and ask questions about their training and experience with LGBTT health issues.
- ✦ Check out the office space and look for bisexual-friendly posters, brochures, magazines or other signs of a LGBTT-positive environment.
- ✦ Listen for how the provider talks with you and whether you are encouraged to talk about your concerns in a culturally sensitive and nonjudgmental manner.
- ✦ If you feel safe, come out to your provider so that you can be open about discussing the issues that are of concern to you and your provider can better understand how to help you stay healthy or get better.
- ✦ If you do not feel comfortable with a provider, shop around to find a place where you can be yourself so that you can get the best health care possible.

Toronto Resources

Canadian Cancer Society
Cancer Info Service • 1-888-939-3333
Smokers' Helpline • 1-877-513-5333
www.cancer.ca

Hassle Free Clinic
Sexual health medical and counselling services.
416-922-0566 • www.hasslefreeclinic.org

Rainbow Services at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Counselling for drug and alcohol concerns.
416.535.8501 ext.6781

Sherbourne Health Centre
LGBTT medical and wellness care, counselling, workshops, group support and Supporting Our Youth programs for LGBTT youth.
Tel. 416.324.4180 • www.sherbourne.on.ca

Toronto Bisexual Network
Peer support and social opportunities for bisexuals.
Tel. 416.925-9872 x2810 • www.torontobinet.org

Internet Resources

Safer Sex for Bisexuals and Their Partners
www.sexualityeducation.com/safersexbi.pdf

Bisexual Resource Center
www.biresource.org

Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition
www.rainbowhealth.ca

LGBT Health Channel
www.gayhealthchannel.com

GLBT Health
www.metrokc.gov/health/glbt/

Let's Talk About Bisexual Health

Health information for bisexuals and people who have sex with women and men



SHERBOURNE Health Centre

Produced by **Sherbourne Health Centre** with support from **The Rotary Club of Toronto.**

Bisexuals and people who have sex with women and men have many of the same health needs as other people, but cultural differences, biphobia and homophobia mean that you may experience these health needs differently. There are also some specific health issues that may be more likely to affect you. It is important that both you and your health care provider are aware of your health care needs. This brochure outlines some of the health issues that are of concern to bisexuals.

EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH

There are many reasons why people may develop emotional or psychological problems during their lives, but bisexuals face particular challenges living in a biphobic, homophobic and heterosexist world. Negative attitudes, discrimination and violence can contribute to mental and emotional distress for bisexuals. Coming out can be emotionally tough with many bi people having to deal with rejection from friends and family, and sometimes from gay or lesbian communities as well. Coming out to partners or potential partners is a unique stressor faced by bisexual people. Staying in the closet can also be difficult, with the fear of discovery leading to isolation for some people. Compounding things further, bisexuals may experience the double closet, hiding their same-sex attractions from heterosexual friends and family and their other-sex attractions from gay and lesbian communities. Bisexuals may also experience social pressure to identify as either gay or straight.

These stressors have a profound impact on bisexuals' self-esteem and self-identities, and studies show that bisexuals suffer from depression, anxiety and suicide at higher rates than gay, lesbian or heterosexual people. If you feel depressed, try to find support to cope with the stress in your life. You might want to talk to family and friends or with a counsellor or others in a support group. Meditation, exercise and making time for things you enjoy may also be helpful.

CANCER

Negative experiences with the healthcare system lead many bisexuals to avoid regular physical exams and routine screening tests. This puts bi people at a higher risk of late diagnosis and treatment of any type of cancer. Higher rates of smoking increase the risk for lung cancer and add to the risk for other cancers. For bi women, breast cancer risk may be increased by higher body weights and alcohol consumption, and by having no biological children or having children after age 30. Bisexual women's risk for ovarian cancer may be elevated if they have neither used oral contraceptives, given birth nor breastfed. Bi men who are sexually active with men are at higher risk for anal cancer, primarily due to an increased rate of human papilloma virus (HPV), the virus that causes genital and anal warts.

It is important for you to assess your personal risk factors and to have routine screenings. Women need to have breast exams and mammograms. Pap smears which screen for cervical cancer are also necessary, even for bisexual women who do not have sex with men. Men need to have screenings for prostate, testicular and colon cancer. Some healthcare providers also now recommend that men who have sex with men get regular anal Pap smears which screen for HPV and abnormal tissue growth.

TOBACCO & SMOKING

What little research has been done indicates that bisexuals smoke cigarettes at much higher rates than straight people. In 2004, 20% of adults over 15 in Canada were current smokers while estimates for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals range from 30-50%. Several factors contribute to these higher rates including high levels of social stress, frequent socializing in bars, and higher rates of alcohol and drug use. Bi people are more likely to be current or past smokers than gay men or lesbians and are at increased risk for developing cancers, heart disease, and emphysema. While quitting smoking is not easy, there are programs and resources to help you be successful.

ALCOHOL & DRUG USE

While there is little information about the rates of substance use among bisexual people, the evidence suggests that bisexuals are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs than heterosexuals. Bisexuals are the most likely to report experiencing problems from alcohol use and bisexual youth are more likely to use drugs than other youth. The use of "party" drugs may also be a concern for bi men who enjoy the gay men's dance club and circuit party scene.

In queer communities, alcohol or drugs may be used to cope with discrimination and internalized homophobia or biphobia, and bars often provide the only comfortable space to meet other lesbian, gay or bisexual people. If you use drugs, learning about them can help make your use safer. If you're concerned about your drug or alcohol use, ask yourself whether it is affecting your health, relationships, job or finances. Also, consider whether your use is leading you to take risks, sexual or otherwise, that you wouldn't take if you were sober. There are many types of alcohol and drug programs and your health care provider can help you choose one that's right for you.

NUTRITION, FITNESS & WEIGHT

Gay and lesbian communities have particular cultural norms about body weight and appearance, and some bisexual people may be affected by these as well. For some queer women, bodies of all shapes and sizes are embraced and dieting and thinness as a desirable standard are rejected. For some queer men, the cultural pressure to achieve the perfect body has resulted in compulsive exercising, steroid use, poor body image and eating disorders. While there's nothing wrong with wanting to look good or having a healthy body image, nutrition and weight concerns can become unhealthy if they make you feel depressed or cause physical harm. Try to educate yourself about good nutrition and develop a program of regular exercise that includes breaks and fun activities.

SEXUAL HEALTH

The increased risk of HIV infection for men who have sex with men is well known. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis, gonorrhea and Hepatitis A and B also occur in higher rates in men who have sex with men. Although women who have sex with women are thought to be at lower risk for contracting STIs, some risks do exist. While HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhea are rarely transmitted, herpes, HPV (genital wart virus) and trichomoniasis are transmitted fairly easily between women during sex. Bisexual men and women who have partners of another sex also need to consider the risks of transmission of HIV and other STIs, as well as the risk of unplanned pregnancy.

To reduce your risk and to protect your partners, get tested regularly for sexually transmitted infections, use latex barriers like gloves and condoms and if you are a man, get vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B. To reduce your risk of unplanned pregnancy, use condoms or another birth control method. Take care of your sex toys by using condoms and cleaning them before sharing with your partner(s).