

## 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 gay men and men who have sex with men, this can be a challenge given the stress of dealing with prejudice and discrimination.

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

Many men 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 gay 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 gay men and men who have sex with men, getting good health care can be hard. Health care providers may be homophobic 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 men 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 gay-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](http://www.cancer.ca)

### Davis Kelley Lesbian and Gay Community Counselling Program

Counselling and partner abuse response services.  
416-595-9618

### Hassle Free Clinic

Sexual health medical and counselling services.  
416-922-0566 • [www.hasslefreeclinic.org](http://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.  
416-324-4180 • [www.sherbourne.on.ca](http://www.sherbourne.on.ca)

## Internet Resources

### Gay Health

[www.gayhealth.com](http://www.gayhealth.com)

### Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Health Links

[www.hsl.mcmaster.ca/tomflem/gay.html](http://www.hsl.mcmaster.ca/tomflem/gay.html)

### Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition

[www.rainbowhealth.ca](http://www.rainbowhealth.ca)

### LGBT Health Channel

[www.gayhealthchannel.com](http://www.gayhealthchannel.com)

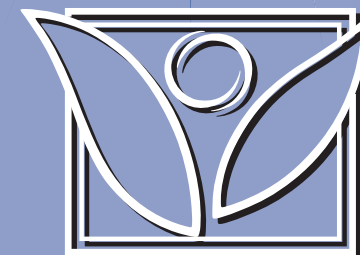
### GLBT Health

[www.metrokc.gov/health/glbt/](http://www.metrokc.gov/health/glbt/)

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

# Let's Talk About Gay Health

Health information for gay men and men who have sex with men.



**SHERBOURNE**  
*Health Centre*

**Gay men and men who have sex with men have many of the same health needs as other men, but cultural differences and the impact of 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 gay men.**

## PARTNER ABUSE

Abuse can happen in any relationship but abuse between men is often misunderstood or trivialized. Abuse can take many forms and it is an attempt by one partner to gain power and control over the other. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize, but it might involve such behaviours as hitting, forced sexual acts, name-calling, threats and financial control. While limited services exist, abused gay men can seek help and support by talking with family, friends or a counsellor. Men who are abusive can seek professional help by talking with their health care provider or a counsellor.

## SEXUAL HEALTH

The increased risk of HIV infection is well known in the gay community, and for many years this has dominated any discussion of gay men's sexual health. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis and gonorrhea also occur in sexually active gay men at high rates. Men who have sex with men are at an increased risk for Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B infections, both of which may lead to liver disease and other problems. Over the past two decades, safer sex practices have been successful in reducing the rates of HIV infection and other STIs, although there have been recent increases in the rates of several sexually transmitted infections. To reduce your risk and to protect your partners, get tested regularly for sexually transmitted infections, use condoms and lube and get vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B. Take care of your sex toys by using condoms and cleaning them before sharing with your partner(s).

## ALCOHOL & DRUG USE

While there is much controversy over the exact rate of substance use in the gay community, the evidence suggests that gay men are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs compared to heterosexual men. Gay men are more likely to report experiencing problems from alcohol use and to continue to drink as they age. Gay men also use some recreational drugs at a higher rate than the general population. These "party" drugs are associated with the dance clubs and circuit parties that are popular with many gay men, and their use is accepted by some men as part of the gay scene.

In queer communities, alcohol or drugs may be used to cope with discrimination and internalized homophobia, and gay bars and dance parties often provide the only comfortable space to meet other men. 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.

## CANCER

Negative experiences with the healthcare system lead many gay men to avoid regular physical exams and routine screening tests. This puts gay men at a higher risk of late diagnosis and treatment of any type of cancer. Gay men who have anal sex are at a significantly higher risk for anal cancer than the general population. About 35 in every 100,000 HIV-negative gay men and about 70 in every 100,000 HIV-positive gay men develop anal cancer, compared to less than one in every 100,000 heterosexual men. These high rates are due primarily to an increased rate of human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. HPV is the virus that causes genital and anal warts and it has been shown to be a risk factor for the development of anal cancer.

Higher rates of smoking tobacco also increase the risk for lung cancer and may add to the risk for other cancers. It is important for you to assess your personal risk factors and to have routine 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 gay men smoke cigarettes at much higher rates than straight men. In 2004, 20% of adults over 15 in Canada were current smokers while estimates for gay men range from 30-50%. Several factors contribute to these higher rates including high levels of social stress, frequent socializing in bars, higher rates of alcohol and drug use and targeted promotions by the tobacco industry. Gay men who smoke are at increased risk for developing lung cancer, heart disease, and emphysema. While quitting smoking is not easy, there are programs and resources to help you be successful.

## EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH

There are many reasons why people may develop emotional or psychological problems during their lives, but gay men face particular challenges living in a homophobic and heterosexist world. Negative attitudes, discrimination and violence can contribute to mental and emotional distress for gay men. Coming out can be emotionally tough with many men having to deal with rejection from family and friends. Staying in the closet can also be stressful, with the fear of discovery leading to isolation for some men. These stressors have a profound impact on gay men's self-esteem and self-identities, and studies show that gay men suffer from depression, anxiety and suicide at higher rates than heterosexual men. 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.

## NUTRITION, FITNESS & WEIGHT

Gay male culture has long valued physical beauty and youth. For some gay men, the cultural pressure to achieve the perfect body has resulted in compulsive exercising and steroid use which can create emotional distress and physical health problems. Gay men are more likely than straight men to have a poor body image and are much more likely to experience an eating disorder such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa. In contrast, the bears in the gay community celebrate large bodies which may put them at higher risk for a number of health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. 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.