

Bisexuals and people who have sex with men and women 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 healthcare provider are aware of your healthcare 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 biophobic, homophobic and heterosexist world. Negative attitudes, discrimination and violence can contribute to mental and emotional distress for bisexuals. Coming out can be emotionally difficult with many bi people having to deal with rejection from family and friends, and sometimes gay and lesbian communities as well. Bisexual people face a unique stressor in coming out to partners or potential partners. Staying in the closet can also be stressful, with the fear of discovery leading to isolation for some people. Bisexuals may experience the double closet, hiding their same-sex attractions from heterosexual family and friends and their other-sex attractions from gay and lesbian communities. Bisexuals may also experience pressure to identify as either gay or straight.

These stressors have a profound impact on self-esteem and self-identity, and studies show that bisexuals suffer from depression, anxiety and suicide at higher rates than gay, lesbian and heterosexual people. Try to find support to cope with stress if you feel depressed. You might want to speak to family and friends, a counsellor or others in a support group. The campus GLBTQ Centre is also a great resource. Meditation, exercise and making time for things you enjoy may also help.

## 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 of lung cancer and add to the risk of other cancers. Breast cancer may be increased by higher body weights and alcohol consumption, and the greater likelihood of either having no biological children or having children after age 30 for bi women. Bisexual women's risk of ovarian cancer may be elevated if they have not used oral contraceptives, given birth or breastfed. Bi men who are sexually active with men are at a higher risk for anal cancer, primarily due to an increased rate of human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus that causes genital and anal warts.

It is important to assess your personal risk factors and 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 be screened for prostate, testicular and colon cancer. Some healthcare providers also recommend that men who have sex with men get regular pap smears which screen for HPV and abnormal tissue growth.

## Tobacco & Smoking

The minimal research that has been completed indicates that bisexuals smoke at much higher rates than straight people. 20% of Canadian adults over 15 were current smokers while estimates for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals ranged from 30-50% in 2004. Several factors contribute to these higher rates including high levels of social stress, frequent socializing in bars, 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 an increased risk of developing cancers, heart disease and emphysema. There are programs and resources to help you successfully quit smoking. Check out [www.gosmokefree.ca](http://www.gosmokefree.ca).

## Alcohol & Drug Use

While there is little information about the rates of substance abuse among bisexual people, evidence suggests that bisexuals are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs compared to 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.

Alcohol and drugs may be used to cope with discrimination and internalized homophobia or biphobia in queer communities. Additionally, bars often provide the only comfortable space to meet gay, lesbian or bisexual people. Ask yourself if your drug use is affecting your health, relationships, job or finances. Also consider whether it 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 healthcare provider can help you choose one that is right for you. The HCS Health Educator can assess you for the Drink Wise program which assists you in cutting back on alcohol use. Call 613-520-6676 for more information.

## Nutrition, Fitness & Weight

Gay and lesbian communities have particular norms about body weight and appearance, and some bisexual people may be affected by these as well. Bodies of all shapes and sizes are embraced and dieting and thinness are rejected for some queer women. The cultural pressure to achieve a perfect body has resulted in compulsive exercising, poor body image and eating disorders for some queer men. Wanting to look good and having a healthy body image is perfectly acceptable, however, nutrition and weight concerns can become unhealthy if they make you feel depressed or cause physical harm. Educate yourself about good nutrition and develop a program of regular exercise that includes breaks and fun activities.

## Sexual Health

The increased risk for HIV infection for men who have sex with men is very high. 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 from women to women, 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.

Get regular STI testing and use latex barriers like gloves, dental dams and condoms and get vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B to reduce your risk and protect your partner(s). Use condoms or another birth control method to reduce your risk of unplanned pregnancy. Use condoms and clean your sex toys before and after sharing them with partner(s).

## 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.

This can be a challenge for bisexuals and people who have sex with women and men given the stress of dealing with prejudice and discrimination. However, being bisexual is a wonderful, positive experience for many people and sexual orientation can be a source of pride and celebration.

Many people become 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 stay 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 these stressors
- Learning about your body so that you know what to do to take care of yourself

## Good Health Care

Finding good healthcare can be difficult for bisexuals and people who have sex with both women and men. Healthcare providers may be biphobic or they may not know much about your health concerns. This can make it difficult to come out to your healthcare provider, and some bisexuals may avoid seeking healthcare altogether. However, 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 healthcare:

- Ask GLBTQ friends about their healthcare providers, or check local queer newspapers and community directories for advice
- Visit potential providers and ask questions about their training and experience with GLBTQ health issues
- Check out the office space and look for bisexual-friendly posters, brochures, magazines or other signs of a GLBTQ-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
- Come out to your provider if you feel safe
- Shop around to find the best healthcare possible



## Ottawa Resources

### Canadian Cancer Society

Cancer Info Service 1-888-939-3333  
Smoker's Helpline 1-877-513-5333  
[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

### The Sexual Health Centre

STI and Anonymous HIV Testing  
Sexual Health Info Line 613-563-2437

### Pink Triangle Services

Serving the gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, two-spirit and queer communities in Ottawa  
613-563-4818  
[www.pinktriangle.org](http://www.pinktriangle.org)

### Carleton University GLBTQ Centre

613-520-3723  
[www.cusaonline.com/glbt](http://www.cusaonline.com/glbt)

## Internet Resources

### Safe Sex for Bisexuals and their Partners

[www.sexualityeducation.com/safesexbi.pdf](http://www.sexualityeducation.com/safesexbi.pdf)

### Bisexual Resource Centre

[www.biresource.org](http://www.biresource.org)

### 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/)

Adapted from the Sherbourne Health Centre  
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# Bisexual Health

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



Health and Counselling  
SERVICES  
Carleton University

613-520-6674  
[carleton.ca/health](http://carleton.ca/health)  
2600 CTTC Building