

Gay Men's Health Fact Sheet Series

1. Gay Men and Health
2. "Coming Out"
3. Sexual Health and Safer Sex
4. Sexually Transmitted Infections
5. Relationships
6. Mental and Emotional Health
7. Gay Men, Drugs and Alcohol
8. Aging Well, Ageism and Gay Men

Why Discuss Gay Men's Health?

Across Canada, gay men are leading vibrant lives full of dreams and ambitions. Gay men are actively contributing to Canadian society and culture through how they work, live and play in different communities. They are sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, lovers, friends and neighbours. In all of the roles that gay men play, maintaining good health means supporting physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being.

This series of fact sheets will highlight some key areas of gay men's lives. Its goal is to help gay men and their friends, lovers and family members start their own conversations about healthy living.

The majority of gay men's health discussions have focused on HIV/AIDS. Talking about HIV/AIDS is only one part of the discussion. Some 30 years before the discovery of HIV/AIDS, gay men were coming together to talk about how their health needs were different from straight men. They looked at a wide range of issues such as being gay, coming out, sexual health, relationships, mental health, substance use and aging. In the early 1980s, large numbers of gay men became infected with HIV and died from AIDS related illnesses.

Consequently in the years that followed, concerns about gay men's overall health took a secondary role as communities of gay men and their supporters shifted all their energies to the fight against AIDS.

In fighting HIV/AIDS, Canadians realized the need to address problems such as discrimination, poverty, and overall health to help reduce HIV infections

and support those already living with the disease.

Gay men and their supporters continue to recognize the primary importance of gay men's health, and they are talking about what good health means for them.

All men have similar health concerns related to their gender. However, there are many health issues connected to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health that affect gay men differently than straight men. Social and cultural differences also play a role.

The Three Hs: Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Heterosexism

'Homosexual' is a medical term used to describe a person who is sexually attracted to someone of the same sex. A person attracted to someone of the opposite sex is called a heterosexual, and a person attracted to both sexes is called bisexual. Homosexuality, or being gay, has existed throughout history and was an accepted part of many cultures.

In many societies, homosexuality is seen as abnormal and unacceptable behaviour. This negative view is called homophobia. It often appears in society in the form of laws or in social or cultural practices and traditions or physical and verbal attacks. Some gay men end up repressing their sexuality because they have lived two lives in a culture where gay men are looked down upon because of their sexuality. Some even lash out at other gay men who are open and comfortable with being gay. This is called internalized homophobia and can prevent

gay men from seeking what they need in order to maintain the best health possible.

Homophobic attitudes are supported by a way of thinking called heterosexism. In heterosexism, only sexual attraction for the opposite sex is supported socially and culturally. Other forms of sexuality are seen as less important or even deviant.

In mainstream media, heterosexuality is depicted as the norm usually without consideration of homosexuality and when there is a consideration it is often done in jest.

Gay men experience heterosexism and homophobia differently. Pressures from homophobia and heterosexism can make it difficult for some gay men to accept their sexuality. This in turn can affect their mental and physical health, the development of well-being, self-esteem and quality of life. It can cause stress and isolation, and can discourage them from accessing health services designed for them. Many men who have sex with men do not identify as gay. Some are married to women and identify themselves as heterosexual or bisexual. In whatever way they identify themselves, their health can be negatively affected by homophobia and heterosexism.

Many gay men find that acknowledging their sexuality is empowering. When gay men discover that there are many communities that proudly accept them as they are, they find support and see that they are not alone in their attraction towards other men. This strength allows them see themselves as important and valuable members of society, and they are able to make better health choices.

Health care providers

Having the right health care practitioner can sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

If a health care practitioner misunderstands the needs of a patient, either by minimizing or overemphasizing the role of sexual orientation, it can lead to misdiagnosis and inappropriate treatment.

Gay men of colour face additional layers of oppression, especially if they come from different cultural backgrounds and experiences. They often face greater obstacles in accessing health care and often experience higher rates of health problems, which are generally underreported and understudied. Thus their needs are often neglected by the system.

Gay men who live in isolated or rural settings also face additional obstacles. Their community may lack physicians and nurses and while confidentiality binds most conversations with physicians, some men are not entirely comfortable discussing their sexual health concerns with the local doctor.

The important thing is to find a trustworthy physician to be able to openly discuss health concerns. Asking friends and gay friendly community agencies for names of doctors they know and trust can be of great help.

Issues to be aware of while searching for a healthcare provider:

- Do they have other gay men in their practice?
- Do they have experience in a specific concern (like substance use)?
- What is their style of communication?

Try setting up an initial introductory visit and remember that gay men, like anyone else, need to be in charge of their own health issues.

“Maintaining good health means supporting physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well being.”