

BEING HEALTHY

Although there have been significant improvements in human rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people, their needs are often overlooked in our health and social service systems. We all deserve to be healthy, regardless of our age, race, income, ability, sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity.

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

GETTING GOOD HEALTH CARE

For lesbians and other women who have sex with women, getting good health care can sometimes be a challenge. Health care providers may be homophobic/transphobic or they may not know much about your health concerns. This can make it tough to come out to your health care provider. But it is important for everyone to go for regular check-ups and to get professional and proactive care. Here are some suggestions to improve the quality of your health care:

- Ask other LGBTQ people about their health care providers and who they recommend, or check RHO's service directory
- Check out the office space and look for LGBTQ-friendly posters, brochures, magazines or other signs of a LGBTQ-positive environment
- Listen for how the provider speaks 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 they can better understand how to help you stay healthy or get better
- If you do not feel comfortable with a provider, look for another so that you can get the best health care possible
- If there are not many providers in your region, look into accessing providers elsewhere who can connect to you via the Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN)

HEALTH & WELLNESS RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society

Smokers' Helpline - 1 877 513 5333
Cancer Screening: cancer.on.ca/getscreened
www.clear-the-air.ca

Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Youth Line

1-800-268-9688 • www.youthline.ca

Rainbow Services at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

416.535.8501

Rainbow Health Ontario

www.RainbowHealthOntario.ca

Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO) is a province-wide program that works to improve the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer people in Ontario through education, research, consultation and the development of healthy public policy.

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ABOUT LESBIAN HEALTH

HEALTH INFORMATION FOR LESBIANS AND
OTHER WOMEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN
TO WHOM THIS MAY APPLY



Rainbow Health Ontario
Santé arc-en-ciel Ontario

Because LGBTQ health matters

To download or order, visit:
www.rainbowhealthontario.ca



www.RainbowHealthOntario.ca

Lesbians and women who have sex with women have many of the same health care needs as the general population, but may also have specific health care needs. Lesbians and women who have sex with women may also experience negative attitudes and discrimination when seeking health care. It can be difficult to find knowledgeable and respectful health care services, but things are improving as Rainbow Health Ontario works with providers to increase capacity to deliver quality care. This brochure outlines some of the health issues that are of concern to lesbians and other women who have sex with women.

EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is shaped by a sense of self-worth, the level of stress to which people are subjected, and the inclusiveness of their workplace and community.

- Lesbians and women who have sex with women experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide than the general population
 - This can be due to internalized, societal and institutional homo/bi/transphobia
 - These stresses can profoundly affect self-esteem, identity and self-acceptance
- Violence and micro-aggressions can further contribute to mental distress and challenges with coming out to friends, family and society

Finding support and help:

- You might want to talk to family and friends or others in a support group
- Explore various coping strategies to deal with stresses and manage self-care such as meditation, physical activity and making time for activities you enjoy

ALCOHOL & DRUG USE

- Alcohol or drugs are sometimes used to cope with homo/trans/biphobia, discrimination and depression.
- If you use drugs, learning about the effects and side effects can help make your use safer
- Ask yourself whether your drug use is affecting your health, relationships, job, studies or finances
- 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 harm reduction programs and your health care provider can help you choose one that's right for you

TOBACCO USE AND SMOKING

Research indicates that LGBTQ communities use tobacco at rates that are two to three times higher than those of the general population. Reasons for this include:

- Used as a coping mechanism for high levels of stress
- Tobacco industry marketing specifically to LGBTQ communities
- Desire to belong to a group
- LGBTQ people might not see themselves represented in mainstream anti-smoking campaigns

If you are interested in reducing tobacco use or making a quit attempt, there are LGBTQ friendly services and resources available in Ontario:

www.clear-the-air.ca

CANCER

Cancer screening rates are low among LGBTQ communities. Screening means getting checked for cancer before you have any symptoms. Screening can stop cancer before it starts or if found, treat it early so that intervention works.

- Anyone with breast tissue is at risk for breast cancer, and should be screened according to guidelines
- Smoking increases the risk for lung cancer, and increases the risk of other types of cancer
- Anyone with a cervix should get regular pap tests to screen for cervical cancer
- People who have anal sex are at higher risk for contracting HPV, which can lead to anal cancer
- LGBTQ women have higher risk factors for colon and breast cancer, so it's important to get screened regularly for these

Speak to your general practitioner about cancer screening, and insist that you receive the screenings that are appropriate for you. If you don't have a general practitioner, there are some screenings that are available without a referral.

BODY IMAGE

- Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes
- LGBTQ people may diet or exercise excessively in order to achieve community standards of physical beauty
- Nutrition and weight concerns can become unhealthy if they make you feel depressed or cause physical harm

RELATIONSHIP HEALTH

Intimate partner violence does occur in LGBTQ relationships. Your health care provider may not ask you about your relationship(s), but you can speak to them if you have any worries about your interactions with your partner(s).

Signs of intimate partner violence may include:

- Your partner gets jealous; makes fun of you; threatens to "out" you or harm you; misgenders you; tries to control your activities, finances, or other relationships; withholds access to medication; pressures or forces you to have sex; is physically violent; or acts in other ways that make you feel unsafe
- Your partner uses one or more parts of your identity (like your gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class, age, culture, religion, spirituality, immigration status, HIV status, body size, appearance, etc.) to manipulate, control, or shame you
- You feel depressed, anxious, angry, afraid, guilty, ashamed or suicidal

Signs of a healthy relationship may include:

- Regular, open communication about the needs and desires of all partners
- Enthusiastic consent in sexual relations and other aspects of the relationship(s)
- Respect for each partner's independence and identities
- You feel joy and happiness, and supported and loved

You can seek support from a health care provider, a counsellor, or a crisis line. If there is any possibility that your partner(s) would access the same support services (e.g. a shelter) as you, especially in a small community, let the staff know.

SEXUAL HEALTH

A person's risk of exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STI) and blood-borne viruses (BBV) depends on the body parts and fluids involved in sexual activity with another person, NOT a person's identity. When discussing your sexual health with a health care provider, make sure to describe your sexual behaviour and ask about the risks of specific sex acts in order to avoid any assumptions. Because of the common perception that lesbians and women who have sex with women are at no or low risk, you may also have to advocate for tests that you may need.

To reduce your risk of STIs and BBVs:

- Negotiate safety with your partner(s), and what are the acceptable levels of risk for all persons involved
- Use barriers such as gloves, dams and condoms with body parts and sex toys - many sexual health clinics and other health care facilities offer these free of charge
- Clean sex toys before sharing with a partner
- Be aware that the use of alcohol and drugs before or during sex, sharing needles, a few BDSM/kink activities, and some sex work may involve a greater level of risk and need to include negotiation
- Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A and B
- If you are HIV negative, ask your health care provider whether PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) or PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) would be helpful for you for HIV prevention

Some trans people taking hormones may still be able to get pregnant or inseminate their partner. To reduce the risk of unplanned pregnancy, use a condom or other barrier method, or speak to your health care provider.

