The health needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people
LGB health needs

• Historically, if LGB health needs have been considered by health and social care professionals at all, it has been in terms of sexual health. Women often assumed to have no specific needs
• LGB people have many of the same health needs as anyone else but they also have unique healthcare concerns
• LGB people experience poorer health in key areas including sexual health, mental health and cancer
• Targeted work with LGB people can help reduce the health inequalities they face

Why is there a high prevalence of priority health issues amongst LGB people?

- It is not the gender or sexual orientation of a person but the experience of social exclusion.

LGB young people’s health needs

- **56%** have deliberately harmed themselves, which can include cutting or burning themselves (NSPCC estimate that between 7-10% of young people in general deliberately harm themselves) [1]
- **23%** have tried to take their own life at some point themselves (Samaritans say that 7% of young people in general ever attempt to take their own life) [1]
- **four times** more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to suffer major depression [2]
- **three times** more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be assessed with generalised anxiety disorder [2]
LGB young people’s health needs

In comparison with heterosexual young women, lesbian and bisexual girls are:

- almost **10 times** more likely to smoke at least weekly [3]
- **twice** as likely to have consumed alcohol in the past month [4]

Young gay and bisexual men:
- may be more likely to use recreational drugs [5]

As few as **13%** of young people have disclosed their sexual orientation to their healthcare provider [6]
LGB young people’s health needs

1. Guasp, A., *The School Report, the experiences of young gay people in Britain’s schools in 2012*, 2012, Stonewall, University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research


LGB young people’s health needs


Young LGB people and suicide

Increased suicide risk is associated with:

- identifying as gay or bisexual at a younger age
- boys (or girls) who do not conform to gender stereotypes
- conflict with parents or peers about their sexual orientation
- not coming out
- being told by other adults that their feelings are transitory or just a phase
- leaving home because of negative attitudes to their sexual orientation [1]
Lesbian and bisexual women’s health needs


Largest ever study of lesbian and bisexual women’s health needs in Europe. Conducted in 2007 with 6,178 responses.
Lesbian and bisexual women’s health needs

- **66%** smoke (compared to 50% of women generally)
- **40%** drink alcohol three times a week (compared to 25% of women generally)
- **5 times** more likely to take drugs
- Less than **50%** screened for sexually transmitted infections
- **20%** had deliberately harmed themselves
- **80%** said they were in good health
Lesbian and bisexual women’s health needs

- 50% exercised 3 times a week
- 50% had negative healthcare experience in last year
- 50% not out to GP
- Lesbians likely to be out when seeking fertility and pregnancy services but may also experience discrimination from these services
Lesbian and bisexual women’s health needs

“I was about to have an x-ray in hospital. The nurses and radiographer asked the routine question of whether there was any chance I could be pregnant, to which I replied in the negative. Without giving me the chance to explain further, they asked if I had a partner with whom I was sexually active, which I confirmed. They started to lecture me about the importance of being sure I was not pregnant before being x-rayed, telling me that there was no way I could possibly be sure I was not pregnant if I was having sex without contraceptives. I was not given a chance to speak at any length during this tirade and eventually had to shout ‘I AM A LESBIAN’ (in front of the entire casualty ward) to get them to stop telling me off and give me the x-ray.”

Tabitha, 25

Largest ever study of gay and bisexual men’s health needs in the world. Conducted in 2011 with 6,861 responses.
Gay and bisexual men’s health needs

- **Two thirds** of gay and bisexual men have smoked at some time in their life compared to half of men in general
- **25%** of gay and bisexual men currently smoke compared to 22 per cent of men in general
- **42%** of gay and bisexual men drink alcohol on three or more days a week compared to 35 per cent of men in general
- **50%** of gay and bisexual men have taken drugs in the last year compared to just one in eight men in general
Gay and bisexual men’s health needs

- In the last year, 3% of gay men and 5% of bisexual men have attempted to take their own life (compared to 0.4% of men in general)
- 6% of gay and bisexual men aged 16 to 24 have attempted to take their own life in the last year (compared to less than 1% of men in general)
- 7% of gay and bisexual men deliberately harmed themselves in the last year (compared to 3% of men in general who have ever harmed themselves)
- 15% of gay and bisexual men aged 16 to 24 have harmed themselves in the last year (compared to 7% of men in general who have ever deliberately harmed themselves)
Gay and bisexual men’s health needs

- **Almost 50%** of gay and bisexual men worry about the way they look and wish they could think about it less.
- **13%** of gay and bisexual men have had a problem with their weight or eating in the last year compared to **4%** of men in general.
- **50%** of gay and bisexual men have experienced at least one incident of domestic abuse from a family member or partner since the age of 16 compared to **17%** of men in general.
- **80%** of gay and bisexual men who have experienced domestic abuse have never reported incidents to the police. Of those who did report, **more than 50%** were not happy with how the police dealt with the situation.
Gay and bisexual men’s health needs

- **Almost 90%** of gay and bisexual men have never discussed heart disease with a healthcare professional. **80%** have never discussed high blood pressure or high cholesterol with a healthcare professional.
- **25%** of gay and bisexual men have never been tested for any sexually transmitted infection.
- **30%** of gay and bisexual men have never had an HIV test in spite of early diagnosis now being a public health priority.
- A **third** of gay and bisexual men who have accessed healthcare services in the last year have had a negative experience related to their sexual orientation.
Bisexual people’s health needs

- Bisexual men know less about STIs and have more unsafe sex than gay men [1]
- Bisexual men more likely to use drugs than gay men [2]
- Bisexual women more likely to smoke and take drugs than heterosexual women [3]
- Bisexual men and women less likely to be comfortable with their sexuality [2]
Bisexual people’s health needs


Older LGB people

Stonewall commissioned YouGov to carry out the **first national comparative study** to examine:

- the expectations heterosexual and gay people have about getting older
- how their experiences differ

The survey involved 1,050 heterosexual and 1,036 lesbian, gay and bisexual people over the age of 55.

Older LGB people

Key findings:

• Getting older can be much more complex for LGB people as they are more likely to face the prospect of living alone or without much personal support

• LGB people are more anxious across a range of issues – including future care needs, independence, mobility and health

• LGB people are more likely to rely on formal support services as they get older

• Many would not feel comfortable being out to health and social care staff
Older LGB people’s health needs

Older lesbian, gay and bisexual people:

• Drink alcohol more often. 45% drink alcohol at least ‘three or four days’ a week compared to just 31% of heterosexual people

• Are more likely to take drugs. 9% have taken drugs within the last year compared to 2% of heterosexual people

• Are more likely to have a history of mental ill health and have more concerns about their mental health in the future. 49% of LGB people worry about their mental health compared to 37% of heterosexual people
Older LGB people’s health needs

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are nearly **twice** as likely as their heterosexual peers to expect to rely on a range of external services, including GP’s, health and social care services and paid help.

At the same time:

- **60%** are not confident social care and support services would be able to understand and meet their needs.
- More than **40%** are not confident mental health services would be able to understand and meet their needs.
- More than **16%** are not confident their GP and other health services would be able to understand and meet their needs.
- Nearly **50%** would be uncomfortable being out to care home staff.
- A **third** would be uncomfortable being out to a housing provider, hospital staff or paid carer.
- **20%** would be uncomfortable being out to their GP.
Only small scale studies undertaken indicating LGB disabled people experience
• difficulties in meeting and knowing other LGB people [1]
• lack of validation for same-sex relationships [1]
• lack of acknowledgement of LGB people [1]
• lack of acceptance in the non-disabled LGB scene
• lack of privacy [1]
• few policies, meaning that staff do not feel supported to do proactive work. [1]
• restricted opportunities for sexual relationships especially for people with learning disabilities [1]
LGB disabled people’s health needs

LGB Black and minority ethnic (BME) people’s health needs

- UK African-Caribbean men twice as likely to be living with diagnosed HIV infection as white gay men and less likely to access services [1]
- BME lesbian and bisexual women more likely to be overweight and to smoke and drink more [2] [3]
- BME lesbians are more likely than white lesbians to maintain strong family ties and have children [4]
- Many BME LGB people experience dissonance between their cultural/religious and sexual identity [5]
- BME LGB young people are less comfortable with their sexual identity than white young people.[6]
LGB Black and minority ethnic (BME) people’s health needs


“You go to the health service, the first thing is they make the assumption that, well, you’re black and you’re six foot five, so you must be straight.” Kevin, 40

“If I walked into an office and there was a little rainbow flag sitting on the desk, or on the wall, something to say ‘You can talk about it here, it’s a safe space,’ I would. But there’s none of that. There’s no indication of that. There’s nothing in anybody’s language, or the way that anybody addresses me, or addresses issues, that would suggest to me that they’d be open and fine about my sexuality, or issues related to that.” Usha, 38
Cancer and gay men

Research suggests indicates gay men are more at risk of:

• Testicular and prostate cancer
• Anal cancer [1] [2] [3] [4]
• Lung and liver cancer [1] [2] [3] [4]


Cancer and lesbians

Lesbians may be at higher risk of breast cancer [1] because they are:

• more likely to delay childbirth (until their 30s);
• less likely to have children;
• less likely to seek regular gynaecological care;
• more likely to be overweight; and
• more likely to drink alcohol than heterosexual women
Lesbians less likely to attend for smear tests, and less likely to be told the risks of cervical cancer, whilst more likely to be refused smears despite:

- sex with men
- sex with women - evidence to suggest that women who have only had sex with women have developed cervical abnormalities.
- smoking is a risk factor for cervical cancer
Cancer and lesbians


Mental Health

- LGB people demonstrate higher rates of anxiety and depression than heterosexuals [1] which can all be linked to effects of prejudice and discrimination [2]
- LGB people have been shown to be at greater risk of self-harm. Bisexual people are at most risk[3] [4]
- Self-esteem is associated with good mental health. Lesbians and gay men are more likely to be comfortable with their sexuality than bisexuals
- Young LGB people are at increased risk of mental health problems [5]
- **One-third** of gay men, a **quarter** of bisexual men and over **40%** of lesbians reported negative or mixed reactions from mental health professionals when they disclosed their sexual orientation [6]
Mental Health


Mental health and hate crime

- **55%** of LGB young people experience homophobic bullying in Britain’s schools [1]
- **20%** of LGB people in Britain have been a victim of one or more homophobic hate crimes or incidents in the previous 3 years [2]
- **36%** of LGB people (aged 60–91) subjected to verbal abuse [3]
- In older LGB people, lower self-esteem and increased thoughts of suicide are associated with experiences of violence [3]
- BME LGB people were more likely to experience physical abuse than their white LGB counterparts [4]
- Perceived discrimination and experiences of victimisation are associated with poor mental health [5]
Mental health and hate crime

1. Guasp, A., *The School Report, the experiences of young gay people in Britain’s schools in 2012*, Stonewall, University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research


4. ‘The Low Down: Black lesbians, gay men and bisexual people talk about their experiences and needs’, Galop.

Impact of hate crime on the health of LGB people

Victims of hate crimes are at greater risk of psychological distress than those who experience violent crime not motivated by hate [1]

Psychological distress can include depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder [2]

Hate crimes threaten the group the victim belongs to as well as the particular individual [3]

Members of a community targeted because of a central identity such as sexual orientation may feel less safe after a fellow group member is targeted [4]

Witnessing discrimination against someone who is from the same group as oneself can lead to depressed emotion and lower self-esteem [5]
Impact of hate crime on the health of LGB people


What is the role of health and social care professionals?

- To understand the needs of LGB patients, service users & staff
- To assess and implement policies, practices & procedures for LGB patients, service users and service users
- To deliver inclusive services to LGB people
Legislative & procedural context for delivering & monitoring work that responds to LGB health needs, Stonewall Healthy Lives Training Module

Recognising the impact of hate crime and domestic violence on lesbian, gay and bisexual people and how this impacts on health, Stonewall Healthy Lives Training Module
Further resources

• Mind has resources on mental health and information on LGB mental health available at: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
• PACE promotes lesbian and gay health and wellbeing [www.pacehealth.org.uk](http://www.pacehealth.org.uk)
• Age Concern has a dedicated National Development Office for Older Lesbians, Gay Men and Bisexuals [www.ageconcern.org](http://www.ageconcern.org)
• HIV and sexual health statistics and information available at:  
  ▪ Terrence Higgins Trust [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)  
  ▪ Health Protection Agency [www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)