

10 things to discuss with your gay and bisexual clients

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Gay and bisexual men are a diverse group and comprise the full spectrum of men. They are part of every age group, ethnicity, race, geographic area, income status and cultural and linguistic group. They can be any size and shape and express their gender in many ways from being traditionally masculine to feminine to androgynous. Whatever the background and however they choose to express themselves many gay and bisexual men experience additional risk factors and barriers to health care that can impact on their health and wellbeing. This resource has been designed to help you understand how common physical and mental health issues and risk factors may be particularly relevant to gay and bisexual men.

It is also important to understand that due to fear of discrimination and past negative experiences with health care providers gay and bisexual men are less likely to be proactive with their health care and avoid screening and regular health check-ups. A non judgemental attitude and welcoming clinical environment are important in assisting gay men to be honest about their lifestyle and health needs with their health care providers. You can make your clinic welcoming to gay and bisexual men by displaying gay and bisexual relevant posters and pamphlets as well as including sexuality in anti-discrimination statements.

1. HIV/AIDS, Safe Sex

Gay and bisexual men continue to make up the highest proportion of new HIV infections in the UK . While the scientific community continue to search for a cure and a vaccine for HIV, condoms and lubricant remains the most effective prevention tool. There are many reasons why gay and bisexual men do not use condoms and it is usually not because they do not know how or when to use them. Gay and bisexual men who struggle with safer sex should not be judged or reprimanded. A patient, understanding and supportive approach should be taken to assist them in

maintaining safer sex practices.

2. Sexually transmitted infections

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, Hepatitis A and B and HSV) occur in sexually active gay and bisexual men at a high rate . Safer sex reduces the risk of sexually transmitted infections, and prevention of these infections through safe sex should be encouraged. Regular screening for these infections should also be performed and contact tracing of sexual partners instigated.

3. Hepatitis A, B & C

Gay and bisexual men are at high risk of sexually transmitted hepatitis A and B. Immunisation for hepatitis A and B should be promoted to all gay and bisexual men. Sexually acquired Hepatitis C also disproportionately affects gay men, especially those who are HIV positive so screening for the infection should be considered.

4. Erectile dysfunction

Physical, psychological or lifestyle issues can all affect a man's ability to gain and maintain an erection. Erectile dysfunction can be an embarrassing problem that many gay and bisexual men are reluctant to talk about so a proactive approach may be necessary to bring the issue out in the open. Unsafe sex has also been linked to erectile dysfunction with some gay and bisexual men finding it difficult to gain and maintain an erection while using a condom.

5. Recreational drug use

Gay and bisexual men use illicit drugs at a higher rate than the general population, and not just in larger communities such as London . These include a number of substances ranging from amyl nitrate ('poppers'), to marijuana, ecstasy, GHB and amphetamines including crystal meth. Some gay and bisexual men who are finding their drug use difficult

may need referral to appropriate counselling or a treatment program. THT Direct 0845 12 21 200 can provide assistance in finding gay and bisexual friendly services.

6. Alcohol

Research studies around the world indicate that there is a high level of alcohol use in the gay community. The gay community have their own distinctive social and cultural practices, including regular socialising in bars and clubs. The health and social effects of excessive alcohol consumption are well documented and it is important that gay and bisexual men are provided sensitive assessment and care.

7. Tobacco

The NHS estimate that 12,000 gay men die from smoking related illnesses every year – much more than deaths related to HIV. Tobacco-related health problems include lung disease and lung cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and a whole host of other serious problems. All gay and bisexual men should be screened for and offered prevention and cessation programs for tobacco use.

8. Depression/anxiety

Many gay and bisexual men often face stigma and discrimination in various aspects of their lives which can be linked to a range of mental health problems. Gay and bisexual men who are out about their sexuality and connected to the gay scene are likely to be the victims of random hostility and/or ongoing harassment. Gay and bisexual men who keep their sexuality a secret may also experience depression or anxiety may be greater, and the problem may be more severe for those men who keep their sexuality a secret or who do not have adequate social supports. Young people may be at particularly high risk of self harm and/or suicide because of these concerns. Homophobia and heterosexism (the belief that everyone is or should be heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior) contribute to a range of problems including violence and the ongoing fear of violence, isolation, social invisibility, self denial, guilt and internalised homophobia. THT Direct 0845 12 21 200 can assist in finding gay friendly counselling and psychotherapy services if a referral is necessary.

9. Fitness (Diet and Exercise)

The importance of body image in gay and bisexual male culture may improve health by encouraging fitness and a healthy lifestyle. However, it can also lead to unrealistic expectations of the ideal body type resulting in a range of

eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa. The use of substances such as anabolic steroids and certain supplements can also adversely affect health. At the opposite end of the spectrum, overweight and obesity are problems that also affect a large subset of the gay and bisexual community. Some gay sub cultures such as 'bears' idealise being overweight which puts them at risk of the negative health impacts of obesity.

10. Partner/domestic violence

While the majority of domestic violence in gay relationships goes unreported, it is estimated that it occurs at approximately the same rate as in heterosexual relationships. There are a lot of stereotypes of gay male relationships that need to be avoided when assessing a patient's potential involvement in domestic violence. For example, people assume that a gay or bisexual man who appears to be effeminate could not perpetrate emotional or physical violence on a more masculine partner. The signs and symptoms of domestic violence are similar to heterosexual couples with a few exceptions. For example, some abusive partners threaten to 'out' their partner to family, friends or colleagues or disclose the partner's positive HIV status to maintain control of the relationship.

The HIV and sexual health charity for life

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