



Health concerns for gay men and men who have sex with men

1. [HIV/AIDS](#) and Safer Sex

That men who have sex with men are at an increased risk of HIV infection is well known, but the effectiveness of safer sex in reducing the rate of HIV infection is one of the gay community's great success stories. However, the last few years have seen the return of many unsafe sex practices. While HIV treatments have dramatically increased life expectancies, there is no substitute for preventing infection. Safer sex is proven to reduce the risk of receiving or transmitting HIV. All health care professionals should be aware of how to counsel and support maintenance of safer sex practices.

2. [Substance Use](#)

Gay men use substances at a higher rate than the general population, and not just in larger communities such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. These include a number of substances ranging from amyl nitrate ("poppers"), to marijuana, Ecstasy, and amphetamines. The long-term effects of many of these substances are unknown; however current wisdom suggests potentially serious consequences as we age.

3. Depression/Anxiety

Depression and anxiety appear to affect gay men at a higher rate than in the general population. The likelihood of depression or anxiety may be greater, and the problem may be more severe for those men who remain in the closet or who do not have adequate social supports. Adolescents and young adults may be at particularly high risk of suicide because of these concerns. Culturally sensitive mental health services targeted specifically at gay men may be more effective in the prevention, early detection, and treatment of these conditions. At Brown, [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) can help with these problems.

4. Hepatitis Immunization

Men who have sex with men are at an increased risk of sexually transmitted infection with the viruses that cause the serious condition of the liver known as hepatitis. These infections can be potentially fatal, and can lead to very serious long-term issues such as cirrhosis and liver cancer. Fortunately, immunizations are available to prevent two of the three most serious viruses. Universal immunization for Hepatitis A virus and [Hepatitis B](#) virus is recommended for all men who have sex with men. Safer sex is effective at reducing the risk of viral hepatitis, and is currently the only means of prevention for the very serious Hepatitis C Virus.

5. [STIs](#)

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) occur in sexually active gay men at a high rate. This includes STIs for which effective treatment is available (syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, pubic lice and others), and for which no cure is available (HIV, Hepatitis A, B, or C virus, Human Papilloma Virus and others). There is absolutely no doubt that safer sex reduces the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, and prevention of these infections through safer sex is key.

6. Prostate, Testicular, and Colon Cancer

Gay men may be at risk for death by prostate, testicular, or colon cancer. Screening for these cancers occurs at different times across the life cycle, and access to screening services may be negatively impacted because of issues and challenges in receiving culturally sensitive care for gay men. All gay men should undergo these screenings routinely as recommended for the general population. All college-age men should conduct regular [testicular self-exams](#) and be screened by a medical provider for testicular cancer.

7. [Alcohol](#)

Although more recent studies have improved our understanding of alcohol use in the gay community, it is still thought that gay men have higher rates of alcohol dependence and abuse than straight men. One drink daily may not adversely affect health; however, alcohol-related problems can occur with low levels of consumption. Culturally sensitive services targeted to gay men are important in successful prevention and treatment programs.

8. [Tobacco](#)

Recent studies seem to support the notion that gay men use tobacco at much higher rates than straight men, reaching nearly 50% in several studies. 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 men should be screened for and offered culturally sensitive prevention and cessation programs for tobacco use.

9. Fitness (Diet and Exercise)

Problems with body image are more common among gay men than their straight counterparts, and gay men are much more likely to experience an eating disorder such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa. While regular exercise is very good for cardiovascular health and in other areas, too much of a good thing can be harmful. The use of substances such as anabolic steroids and certain supplements can adversely affect health. At the opposite end of the spectrum, overweight and obesity are problems that also affect a large subset of the gay community. This can cause a number of health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Our [Nutrition](#) section includes information on healthy eating, sports nutrition, eating concerns and campus resources.

10. Anal Papilloma

Of all the sexually transmitted infections gay men are at risk for, [human papilloma virus](#) --which cause anal and genital warts -- is often thought to be little more than an unsightly inconvenience. However, these infections may play a role in the increased rates of anal cancers in gay men. Some health professionals now recommend routine screening with anal Pap Smears, similar to the test done for women to detect early cancers. Safer sex should be emphasized. Treatments for HPV do exist, but

recurrences of the warts are very common, and the rate at which the infection can be spread between partners is very high.

*Adapted from Vincent M. B. Silenzio, MD, MPH, Board of Directors, GLMA
Co-Editor, Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association*

[back to top](#)

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