



Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination

LGBT Sexual Health Fact Sheet

People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) are members of every community. They are diverse, come from all walks of life, and include people of all races and ethnicities, all ages, all socioeconomic statuses, and from all parts of Guyana. The perspectives and needs of LGBT people should be routinely considered in public health efforts to improve the overall sexual health of every person and eliminate health disparities.

In addition to considering the needs of LGBT people in programs designed to improve the sexual health of entire communities, there is also a need for culturally competent medical care and prevention services in Guyana that are specific to this population. *Social inequality is often associated with poorer health status, and sexual orientation has been associated with multiple health threats.* Members of the LGBT community are at increased risk for a number of sexual health threats when compared to their heterosexual peers.¹² Differences in sexual behavior account for some of these disparities, but others are associated with social and structural inequities, such as the stigma and discrimination that LGBT populations experience.

Guyana's Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD) is aware of the concerns around the lack of confidentiality, or stigma and discrimination that can prevent LGBT persons in Guyana to use local health care establishments as resources for sexual health questions, screenings, or treatments. This issue can in part be attributed to the lack of knowledge or understanding by Guyanese health care professionals, in the ability to counsel persons from the LGBT community on risks and prevention strategies related to their specific sexual health needs. A study by Radix et al. further revealed that 67% of Caribbean-born physicians have exhibited intolerant attitudes towards LGBT patients, compared to just 14% of non-Caribbean born doctors.³

This is an unacceptable statistic when considering the sexual health issues that LGBT community members may require medical support for.

¹ Mayer KH, Bradford JB, Makadon HJ, et al. Sexual and gender minority health: What we know and what needs to be done. American Journal of Public Health. 2008;98: 989-995.

² Meyer IL, Northridge ME. Eds. The Health of Sexual Minorities: Public Health Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Populations. New York: Springer. 2007.

³ Radix, A.E., Buncamper, C., & Van Osch, G. (2004) Attitude of General Practitioners towards homosexuals in the Caribbean. Poster Exhibition: The XV International AIDS Conference

A note on terminology

STI: Sexually Transmitted Infection

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

HIV Test & STI Screening:

Referrals through

National AIDS

Programme Secretariat (NAPS)

Address:

Hadfield Street & College Road, Georgetown
Werkenrust

Phone:

592-227-8683

592-226-5371

592-223-7138/9

Contact SASOD @

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592-623-5155

Sexual Health among Lesbian/Bisexual Women

Contrary to some beliefs, lesbian and bisexual women are at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and should take steps to avoid contracting these. While the risk of some infections, such as HIV, is lower in women who only have sex with women, transmission is still a possibility if there is any blood involved (either from 'rough' sex, or menstrual fluids) or if toys are shared. Further, bisexual women are at risk during unprotected sex with men. Any exchange of bodily fluids between women is a potential risk for other STIs. These include: **Also applies to sexually active men who have sex with men (MSM) persons*

- **Genital herpes*** – caused by a virus acquired during vaginal, oral, anal sex or sharing toys, this infection can cause painful blisters and ulcers around the genital area.
- **Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)*** – this virus can cause itchy but often painless warts on the genitals, and is usually contracted from skin contact, such as occurs during rubbing genitals together or anal sex. Importantly, HPV infection is also a risk factor for developing cervical cancer in the future.
- **Trichomoniasis** – any sex that involves vaginal secretions can potentially lead to this infection which causes a frothy vaginal discharge, painful/uncomfortable urination, soreness and sometimes a bad vaginal smell.
- **Gonorrhea and Chlamydia*** – these bacterial infections can be caused by shared toys, hands or rubbing genitals. They can show as a discharge but often there are no signs, however if untreated can lead to internal infections and infertility.
- **Syphilis*** – Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. Sores occur mainly on the external genitals, vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores also can occur on the lips and in the mouth. Shows as a painless genital ulcer that will eventually go away on its own. However, if untreated, syphilis can lead to severe heart, brain and whole-body damage later on.
- **Hepatitis B Virus*** – Hepatitis B is spread when body fluids, such as semen, vaginal fluid, or blood, from a person infected with the Hepatitis B virus enter the body of someone who is not infected. The Hepatitis B virus is 50–100 times more infectious than HIV and is easily transmitted during sexual activity and goes on to cause severe liver damage.

There are two conditions which are not normally thought of as STIs, but which sex between women can put one at risk for:

- **Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)** – this condition happens when the balance between the 'good' bacteria normally present in the vagina and the 'bad' bacteria tips in favor of the 'bad' bacteria so that they overgrow and cause vaginal itching, discharge, and a bad smell. BV is quite common in lesbians and bisexual women, for reasons not fully understood as yet.
- **Yeast infection (Thrush)** – This overgrowth of the yeast candida can be caused by touching or sharing toys. Symptoms include vaginal itching, soreness/pain, burning urination and a thick white discharge.

Many of these infections are easily treatable if caught early, so pay attention to changes in your body and visit a doctor or pharmacist promptly in order to avoid serious consequences. Regular HIV testing is also advisable if any risky activity with other women or unprotected sex with men occur.

In addition to practicing safe sex, sexual health means getting regular checkups and regular pap smears or Visual Inspection with Acetic Acid (VIA), to screen for cervical cancer even if you've never had sex with a man because HPV can be transmitted between women. Screening should start at 21 and be done every two to three years once negative.

Sexual Health among Gay/Bisexual Men

In Guyana, HIV continues to be a major sexual health concern for gay and bisexual men to be aware of. A report prepared by the Presidential Commission on HIV and AIDS presented a survey which indicated an HIV prevalence of just over 21% in men who identified as having sex with men (MSM). Although this statistic is concerning, the HIV rate among the MSM population in Guyana is decreasing.⁴ This can be attributed to the increased awareness promoted by organizations such as NAPS, SASOD, and UNAIDS, as well as the

⁴ Government of Guyana Global AIDS Response Progress Report, 2012-2013; Section I, p.10

increased vigilance among members of the MSM community. In addition to HIV, members of the MSM community are at risk for other specific STIs. These include:

- **HIV** – spread through certain fluids – blood, semen (*cum*), pre-seminal fluid (*pre-cum*), rectal fluids, from an HIV-infected person. These fluids must come in contact with a mucous membrane or damaged tissue for transmission to possibly occur. Mucous membranes can be found inside the rectum, the opening of the penis, and the mouth.
- **Hepatitis A** – hepatitis A is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter—even in microscopic amounts—from an infected person. Among MSM, Hepatitis A can be spread through direct anal-oral contact or contact with fingers or objects that have been in or near the anus of an infected person.
- **Gonorrhea and Chlamydia** – *of the rectum* if you've had receptive anal sex, or been a "bottom".
- **Gonorrhea and Chlamydia** – *of the penis (urethra)* if you have had insertive anal sex or received oral sex.
- **Gonorrhea** – *of the throat* if you've performed oral sex (i.e., your mouth on your partner's penis or anus).

Sexual Health among Transgender/Transsexual Persons

Studies from other countries show transgender people are at especially high risk for HIV and other STIs. A similar situation may possibly exist in the Caribbean considering discrimination and transphobia often lead to risky behavior and practices. As such, it is important for transgender/transsexual persons to be aware of all relevant STIs detailed above, and the preventions outlined below. Additionally, transgender/transsexual persons have other unique sexual health aspects to consider.

Transgender men who have sex with men are at high-risk for unintended pregnancy, so protection with condoms or other forms of contraception (ex. Intrauterine device - IUD) is highly recommended. Testosterone injections can decrease fertility but are not an effective contraception, so if a transgender man is receiving testosterone another contraceptive method is needed to avoid pregnancy.

Regardless of gender identity, you should screen for the body parts that are present, so if you still have a cervix, breasts or prostate, get screened for cervical, breast and prostate cancer respectively. If taking hormones, be aware of the risks of hormone treatment, including blood clots, swelling, high or low blood pressure and high blood sugar, and ways to mitigate these effects.

How to mitigate your own sexual health risks:

- Get tested! Regular (every 3-6 months) HIV testing is encouraged for MSM and sexually active persons.
- Protect yourself! Ensure condoms are used and know your partner's status.
- Get screened for common STIs if you've been sexually active in the last year.
- Get vaccinated: LGBT persons are at greater risk for hepatitis A and hepatitis B. For this reason, CDC recommends that you be vaccinated against these.
- Use a condom on sex toys being used on a new partner and change condoms when changing where is being penetrated. Toys should be washed with soap and water after/before use.
- Avoid oral sex if either partner has cuts or sores around or in the mouth or use a dental dam.
- Because some infections can be transmitted by hands and fingers, wash hands before and after sex.

In view of the general climate in Guyana for health care services currently provided to LGBT community members, it is paramount that LGBT persons take responsibility for their own sexual health where possible. **If you experience discrimination through a health care provider in maintaining your sexual health, you are encouraged to contact SASOD and your community social worker to report the violation.** It is also important to understand that LGBT persons can have regular, safe, and enjoyable sex lives. This is done through knowing what the sexual risks are, and the corresponding protections available to safeguard your sexual health.