



## *Lesbians and Bisexual Women*

### Access to Care and Cancer Disparity Fact Sheet

#### **Access to Care Disparities:**

- Lesbians and bisexual women may delay or avoid care because of insufficient finances or a lack of adequate health insurance. These women often have less access to health insurance than the general population, as most workplace policies do not cover unmarried partners<sup>1</sup>.
- Past negative experiences and mistrust of the medical profession may cause lesbians and bisexual women to avoid visiting a health care professional. These women may also be more guarded during discussions regarding their health, for fear that “coming out” will lead to discrimination<sup>2</sup>.

#### **Cancer Disparities:**

##### **Breast Cancer:**

- Epidemiological data suggests that lesbians and bisexual women may have an elevated risk for breast cancer due to higher rates of obesity and alcohol consumption<sup>3</sup>.
- Lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to never become pregnant, and are also more likely to delay childbirth until after the age of 30<sup>4</sup>.
- Lesbians and bisexual women may be less likely to perform regular self-breast examinations as well as seek gynecological care, reducing their chances of early diagnosis of gynecological cancers<sup>5</sup>.

##### **Cervical Cancer:**

- Lesbians and their physicians may incorrectly assume that they are not at risk for cervical cancer because they do not have sex with men.
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is the primary culprit for causing cervical cancer. Lesbians and bisexual women may be at a decreased risk of acquiring HPV if they have infrequent sexual intercourse with men, although it is possible for HPV to be transmitted between women during sex.

##### **Ovarian Cancer:**

- Lesbians and bisexual women may not undergo regular physical examinations, or tests such as the recto-vaginal pelvic exam, which enable the early detection of ovarian cancer.
- Due to the decreased chance of becoming pregnant, lesbians and bisexual women are more likely to have never used oral contraceptives. They are less likely to have never had a full term pregnancy or breast-fed. These factors increase ovarian cancer risk.

## **Lung Cancer:**

- 56% of adult lesbian women report being a smoker at some point in their lives, compared to 42% of adult heterosexual women. This puts adult lesbian women at a higher risk of developing lung cancer<sup>6</sup>.
- Tobacco use takes the lives of an estimated 40,000 gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people each year<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>.
- Lesbians and bisexual youth may have a higher rate of smoking. In a CDC study, 59% of teenagers who identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual reported using tobacco products, compared to 35% of straight teenagers<sup>11</sup>.
- High smoking rates in this population may be attributed to the pressure for acceptance, low self-esteem, and the role of bar culture in the social scene.
- According to the 1988 National Lesbian Survey, the rate of smoking among lesbians increases with age, whereas rates of smoking among women in the general population decline with age<sup>12</sup>.

## **Opportunities to Foster Change:**

- Provide culturally and linguistically appropriate information to public and health care providers about prevention, detection, and treatment.
- Promote access to prevention, detection and treatment.
- Maintain and support continuous research about GLBT health and disease prevention.
- Quit or do not start smoking, reduce fat consumption, participate in regular physical activity, assess personal risk factors, get screenings when appropriate<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens PE. Structural and interpersonal impact of heterosexual assumptions on lesbian health care clients. *Nursing Research*. 1995;44(1):25-30.

<sup>2</sup> Dean, L. et al. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health: Findings and Concerns. Jan 2000, conference edition.

<sup>3</sup> Haynes, S. Breast Cancer risk: Comparisons of lesbians and heterosexual women. *Cancer and Cancer Risks Among Lesbians*. Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center Community Liaison Program, Seattle, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Denenberg R. Report on lesbian health. *Women's Health Issues*. 1995;5(2):181-191.

<sup>5</sup> Trippet SE, Bain J. Reasons American lesbians fail to seek traditional health care. *Health Care Women International*. 1992;13:145.

<sup>6</sup> Valanis BG, Bowen DJ, Bassfort T, Whitlock E, Charney P, Carter RA. [Sexual orientation and health: comparisons in the women's health initiative sample](#). *Archives of Family Medicine*. 9(9):843-53, 2000 Sep-Oct.

<sup>7</sup> CDC. Cigarette smoking-attributable mortality and potential years of life lost—United States, 1984. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 46(20): 444-451, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Kinsey, A.C.; Pomeroy, W.B.; and Martin, C.E. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders, 1948.

<sup>9</sup> Kinsey, A.C.; Pomeroy, W.B.; Martin, C.E.; and Gebhard, P. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders, 1953.

<sup>10</sup> Gay and Lesbian Medical Association and LGBT health experts. *Healthy People 2010 Companion Document for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Health*. San Francisco, CA: Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan, H.; Wortley, P.M.; Easton, A.; Pederson, L.; and Greenwood, G. Smoking among lesbians, gays, and bisexuals: a review of the literature. *Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2001; 21(2); 142-9.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/glb/tobacco.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Gay and Lesbian Medical Association and LGBT health experts. *Healthy People 2010 Companion for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Health*. San Francisco, CA: Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, 2001.