

Older lesbians, gays have higher rates of chronic disease, mental distress, isolation

March 29 2011

Members of California's aging lesbian, gay and bisexual population are more likely to suffer from certain chronic conditions, even as they wrestle with the challenges of living alone in far higher numbers than the heterosexual population, according to new policy brief from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

Half of all gay and bisexual adult men in California between the ages of 50 and 70 are living alone, compared with 13.4 percent of [heterosexual men](#) in the same age group. And although older California lesbians and bisexual women are more likely to live with a partner or a family member than their male counterparts, more than one in four live alone, compared with one in five [heterosexual women](#).

A lack of immediate family support may impact aging LGB adults' ability to confront statistically higher rates of diabetes, [hypertension](#), [poor mental health](#), physical disability and self-assessed fair or poor health, compared with demographically similar aging heterosexual adults.

The study, which draws upon three cycles of data from the biennial California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), underscores the importance of considering these unique needs and [chronic health conditions](#) in providing health care and social services to the estimated 170,000 self-identified aging LGB adults in California — a population that will double in size over the next 20 years.

"Many aging LGB Californians do not have biological children or strong family support," said Steven P. Wallace, the lead researcher on the project. "Organizations that serve these communities need to take this into account and consider outreach and support mechanisms that enable these individuals to maintain their independence and ability to [age](#) safely and in good health."

The policy brief, "The Health of Aging Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adults in California," includes the first data published on aging LGB adults based on a large statewide population. And among a population whose health needs are too often associated only with HIV and AIDS, the study offers the first insights about broader health conditions and trends.

Among the findings:

- Gay and bisexual men have more chronic conditions

Gay and bisexual men experience higher rates of high blood pressure, diabetes, psychological distress, physical disability and poor self-rated health than their heterosexual counterparts.

- Aging LGBs suffer greater psychological distress

Aging LGBs report symptoms of psychological distress significantly higher than their heterosexual counterparts (1.45 times higher for gay and bisexual men and 1.35 times higher for LGB women).

- Even more affluent, educated LGBs may be uninsured

Only one in five aging LGBs is low-income, and 35 percent are highly educated (compared with 16.6 percent of the heterosexual population), yet aging LGBs have a statistically similar rate of being uninsured (8.1 percent versus 10.6 percent of heterosexuals).

Since chronic and life-threatening health conditions appear increasingly in individuals' early 50s, the authors studied the health of LGBs between the ages of 50 and 70 as a "first look" at the likely health profile of this coming generation of LGB elderly.

And the report's authors recommend that service providers prepare for this generation, both by providing services and resources that target LGBs and by increasing cultural competency and sensitivity among health care providers.

"Access may be equal, but we know that quality of care for LGBs often isn't," said Susan Cochran, a co-author of the study and a professor of epidemiology at the UCLA School of Public Health. "Attitudes are changing, but we still have to continue to push to eliminate discrimination and increase understanding of the rich and diverse life experiences of these individuals to improve the quality of the care they receive."

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

Citation: Older lesbians, gays have higher rates of chronic disease, mental distress, isolation (2011, March 29) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-03-older-lesbians-gays-higher-chronic.html>

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