

LGBT Population & Smoking

The prevalence of tobacco use among LGBT populations has not been adequately examined, as national and most state surveys on tobacco lack questions about sexual orientation and gender identity.¹ Further research is still needed in order to understand the prevalence of tobacco use and the risk factors that influence LGBT smoking behavior, particularly in the transgender community.

Adults

Although the latest research indicates a wide range of smoking prevalence among LGB* adults (24 to 48%), the data consistently points to disparities between LGB groups and the general population.¹⁻⁶ Overall, sexual minorities are 1.5 to 2.5 times more likely to smoke cigarettes than heterosexuals.⁷

Several factors such as higher levels of social stress, frequent patronage of bars and clubs, higher rates of alcohol and drug use, and direct targeting of LGB consumers by the tobacco industry may be related to higher prevalence of tobacco use among LGB groups compared to the general population.⁸

Although the data is limited to just a handful of state surveys, studies show that bisexuals mostly smoke at higher rates than their heterosexual, gay and lesbian peers, with prevalence rates as high as 48 percent.^{4-6, 9}

Bisexual women are up to 3.5 times more likely to be smokers than heterosexual women.⁷

Data is slightly more inconsistent among bisexual men. Washington state and Massachusetts show that the prevalence of smoking among bisexual men is almost twice that of heterosexual men. Yet, in California, both groups smoked at about the same rate.^{3,5,6}

The smoking prevalence among lesbian women is 1.5 to 2.4 times the current smoking rates among heterosexual women or women in the general population.³⁻⁶ In California, the smoking prevalence among WSW (women who have sex with women but do not self-identify as lesbians) is over 3.5 times higher than among women in the general population (44% vs. 12%).⁴

The average prevalence of smoking among gay men is a little more than 30 percent, compared to 21 percent among heterosexual males.^{2,3,5,6}

**The limited studies available on this population do not include specific information on transgender individuals as a subgroup.*

Youth

Smoking rates among LGB youth are considerably higher (38% to 59%) than those among adolescents in general (28% to 35%).⁸

In a national sample of youth, lesbian and bisexual girls were 9.7 times more likely to smoke cigarettes at least weekly compared to heterosexual girls.¹⁰

Adolescent boys and girls with both-sex romantic attractions or relationships are more likely to be smokers than adolescents with opposite-sex attractions or relationships.^{11,12}

Research suggests that smoking rates are high among LGB youth because of unique stressors that contribute to their risk of substance use, such as the stresses of “coming out,” physical and verbal victimization, feelings of alienation and depression.⁸

Industry Targeting

Industry documents show that tobacco companies were aware of high smoking rates among sexual minorities, and marketing plans illustrate the companies’ efforts to exploit the LGB market.¹³⁻¹⁵ Analysis of tobacco marketing has demonstrated lesbian and gay youth as an emerging target community.¹⁶

Tobacco companies promote specific brands to LGB populations through outdoor advertising, ads in gay-oriented magazines, nightclub and bar promotions, and event sponsorships.^{5,17}

As one tobacco company document explains, “A large percentage of gays and lesbians are smokers. In order to grow the Benson & Hedges brand, it is imperative to identify new markets with growth potential. ... Gays and lesbians are good prospects for the Benson & Hedges brand.”¹³

In 1995, a tobacco company conducted a marketing plan called “Project SCUM” (Subculture Urban Marketing) targeting urban San Francisco populations, including gays.¹⁵

Rather than viewing tobacco-industry targeting as exploitative, focus group data from 2003–2004 showed that LGBT individuals perceived targeting of their demographic by the tobacco industry as indicative of social acceptance, inclusion and marketplace equality. The attention of the tobacco industry was seen as validation of LGBT community influence and legitimacy.¹⁸

A recent study shows LGB communities, particularly lesbian and bisexual women, are disproportionately impacted by tobacco-industry marketing in terms of exposure and receptivity, in comparison to straight men and women.⁵

Smoking Cessation

Compared to all adult smokers, more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender smokers believe smoking increases their risk of diseases such as lung cancer and heart disease. However, some research indicates that fewer LGBT smokers have made quit attempts (75% compared with 80% of all adults).¹⁸

Despite lesbian and WSW having the highest smoking prevalence of any LGB subgroup, lesbian periodicals had the fewest cessation ads: only eight appeared over a 10-year period, compared to more than 1,000 in periodicals targeted to gay men.¹⁹

Despite high rates of smoking among LGBT individuals, only 24 percent of LGBT community leaders interviewed between 2002 and 2004 named tobacco as a pressing health concern for the LGBT community.²⁰

Sources

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