

Breast Cancer in Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Important Statistics

An increasing number of research studies in recent years suggest that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals are at greater risk than the general population to suffer adverse health outcomes. A review of the literature explored cancer-related screening behaviors, risk factors, and self-reported breast cancer histories among lesbian and bisexual women. (Cochran et al., 2001).

- Lesbian and bisexual women are less likely to undergo routine mammography screening. This may be explained by fewer triggers to seek routine gynecologic care and lower rates of insurance due to the absence of spousal health insurance. (Cochran et al., 2001).
- Lower rates of screening might result in later detection of cancers, thereby increasing morbidity and mortality rates. (Cochran et al., 2001).
- Lesbian and bisexual women are less likely to have had a full-term pregnancy (Cochran et al., 2001), a risk factor for breast cancer. (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2009).
- Lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to be overweight (Cochran et al., 2001), a risk factor for postmenopausal breast cancer. (ACS, 2009).
- Lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to consume alcohol at higher rates. (Cochran et al., 2001), a risk factor for breast cancer. (ACS, 2009).
- Lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to have negative experiences with practitioners and mistrust the health care community. (Cochran et al., 2001).

Other studies have found that the experience of homophobia and heterosexism within the health care system is related to avoidance of routine health care screenings by lesbian and bisexual women. (McNair, 2003).

Limitations of the Data

The question of whether or not LGBT women are at an increased risk for developing breast cancer is an emerging research question in public health. (Cochran et al., 2001). However, in the past twenty years, there has been limited research on health disparities experienced by sexual and gender minorities.

- LGBT individuals represent a small and largely hidden subpopulation, with lesbians representing approximately 3 percent to 4 percent of adult women. (Cochran et al., 2001).
- Most studies of LGBT health behaviors have used small convenience samples from community settings without heterosexual controls. (Cochran, 2001).
- Little research has been directed towards LGBT individuals. Between 1980 and 1999, only 0.1 percent of the MEDLINE database focused on LGBT individuals. (Boehmer, 2002).

- Between 1982 and 1992, there was a disproportionate allocation of funding by the National Institutes for Health for LGBT-related research that focused more on HIV (average \$20 million annually) in comparison to funding for LGBT-related research for all other diseases (average \$532,000 annually). (Boehmer, 2002).
- This data indicates that public health research neglected the LGBT population and that LGBT persons are underrepresented as explicit research subjects in breast cancer research. (Boehmer, 2002).

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