

gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens: information for teens and parents



If you've ever wondered if you're gay, lesbian, or bisexual, you're not alone. Many teens ask themselves this question. It is a normal part of life.

Maybe you've been attracted to someone of the same gender or you may have even kissed or had other sexual contact with someone of the same sex. But sexual behavior is not always the same as sexual orientation. Sexual orientation develops as you grow and experience new things. It may take time to figure it all out.

So don't worry if you're not sure. If over time your attraction to members of the same sex continues to grow, it's not a bad thing, it's just who you are.

Read on to find helpful information as you discover more about yourself, your friends, and your place in the world. There also is information that may help your parents understand you better.

What is sexual orientation?

Let's start with a few definitions.

Sexual orientation: Whether a person is attracted to a person of the same sex or a different sex. For example,

- **Straight** (or heterosexual): People who have sexual or romantic feelings for people of the opposite gender. Men are attracted to women and women are attracted to men.
- **Gay** (or homosexual): People who have sexual or romantic feelings for people of the same sex. Men are attracted to men and women are attracted to women.
- **Bisexual** (or bi): People who have sexual or romantic feelings for both men and women.
- **Lesbian:** Gay woman.

Who's gay?

Some estimates say that about 10% of the population is gay. There are gay people of every race, age, family background, and body type. You can't tell just by looking at someone that he or she is gay. Just because a boy has some feminine qualities or a girl acts a little masculine does not mean that he or she is gay.

Am I normal?

Homosexuality is *not* a mental disorder. All of the major medical organizations, including The American Psychiatric Association, The American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics agree that homosexuality is not an illness or disorder, but a form of sexual expression.

No one knows what causes a person to be gay, bisexual, or straight. There probably are a number of factors. Some may be biological. Others may be psychological. The reasons can vary from one person to another. The fact is, you do not choose to be gay, bisexual, or straight.

Talk about it

If you're confused or worried, it's important that you talk about your feelings. Find someone you trust to talk with. It might not be easy but in the end it's better if you do. The following are some people you may want to talk with:

- Parents
- Close friends or family members
- Your pediatrician
- Gay, lesbian, or bisexual friends
- A teacher, school counselor, coach, or other adult mentor
- A minister, priest, rabbi, or spiritual advisor
- A local gay, lesbian, and bisexual support group

Coming out

If you are nervous about "coming out of the closet" or revealing your sexual orientation to others, that's OK. Not everyone accepts homosexuality so sharing this information may be difficult for you. Some people wrestle with this for years before finally deciding to do it. Others keep their sexual orientation a secret for their entire lives.

Remember that only you can decide the best time to share this information with your family and friends. Do not feel pressured to "come out" before you are ready.

The following are some things that might help as you decide:

- **Learn from others.** Talk to other gay friends about their experiences. This may help you know what to expect. Gay youth organizations also can be a great source of support (see "Resources" at the end of this publication).
- **Choose a good time and place to tell your family.** If this information comes out during a family conflict or crisis, it may be even harder for them to accept it.
- **Be prepared for a variety of reactions** including shock, denial, anger, guilt, sadness, and even rejection. Remember, you have had time to accept your identity. Give your family and friends time, too. Try to stay open, honest, and patient.

Health concerns for gay and lesbian youth

Sexual activity. Most teens, whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight, are not sexually active. In fact, not having sex is the only way to be completely protected against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). But if you choose to have sex, make sure you know the risks and how to stay safe.

- **Always use a condom.** HIV, AIDS, and many other diseases are spread during anal, vaginal, or oral intercourse. Gay males and bisexuals must be particularly careful and should always use latex condoms to protect against these diseases. Lesbians should use latex dental dams to help avoid STIs.
- **Avoid risky sexual practices.** Using alcohol and drugs before or during sex, having unknown sexual partners, or having sex in unfamiliar or public places can spread STIs and other serious health problems or lead to unwanted pregnancies.
- **See your doctor.** Regular checkups are important to make sure you stay healthy. They are also a great opportunity to talk with your pediatrician about any questions or concerns you have about STIs or other health issues.
- **Make sure all of your immunizations are up-to-date.** Check that you have had 3 doses of the hepatitis B vaccine. Hepatitis B is a virus that can make you very sick. It can be spread through contact with body fluids.

Substance use. Avoid using drugs or alcohol to relieve depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Doing so can lead to addiction. Drug and alcohol use can also lead to unsafe sex.

A message to parents

Finding out your son or daughter is gay, lesbian, or bisexual can be difficult. Parents often feel guilty. They ask themselves questions like, "Did I do anything to cause this?" "Should we have done something differently when he was a child?" "Is it my fault?" Questions like these are common, but do not help.

Rejecting your child also is not a good response. It may have been very difficult for your child to come to terms with her or his sexuality. But it could be devastating if you reject her or him at the same time. Your child needs you very much!

So take a deep breath and think. Take a little time to come to grips with your child's news. You may need to readjust your dreams for your child's future. You may have to deal with your own negative stereotypes of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. *But you must not reject your teenager.* He or she is still your child and needs your love and support.

Your teen did not choose to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Accept her or him and be there to help with any problems that arise. Your pediatrician may be able to help you with this new challenge or suggest a referral for counseling. You also may find it helpful to talk with other parents whose children are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Check "Resources" at the end of this publication for information about support groups for parents.

Mental health. Isolation, rejection, ridicule, harassment, depression, and thoughts of suicide—any teen may feel these things at some time. However, gay and lesbian youth are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide than straight teens. About 30% of those who try to kill themselves actually die.

Counseling may be helpful if you feel confused about your sexual identity. However, avoid any treatments that claim to be able to change your sexual orientation, or treatment ideas that see homosexuality as a sickness.

Discrimination and violence. Gay and lesbian youth are at high risk for becoming victims of violence. Studies have found that 30% to 70% of gay youth have experienced verbal or physical assaults in school. They also may be called names, harassed by others, or rejected by friends and family.

There are things you can do to avoid becoming a victim of violence, especially at school.

- **Talk with someone you trust.** A trusted school counselor, administrator, or teacher should be told about any harassment or violence you have experienced at school. You have the right to attend a safe school that is free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse.
- **Get involved in gay/straight alliances at your school (or help form one).** These groups can help promote better understanding among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, and other students and teachers.
- **Join a gay youth support group in your community.**
- **Encourage your parents to join a support group.** See "Resources" at the end of this publication for groups for parents and family members of gay and lesbian teenagers.

Resources

The Hetrick-Martin Institute

www.hmi.org

Lambda Youth OUTreach

www.lambda.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

www.thetaskforce.org

National Youth Advocacy Coalition

www.nyacyouth.org

OutProud, the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth

www.outproud.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

www.pflag.org

Youth Guardian Services

www.youth-guard.org

Youth Resource

A Project of Advocates for Youth

www.youthresource.com

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The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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