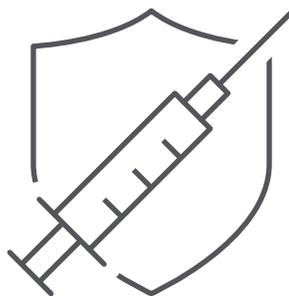
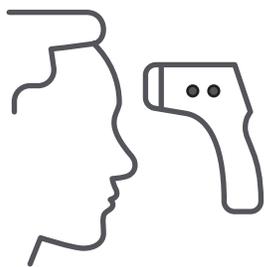
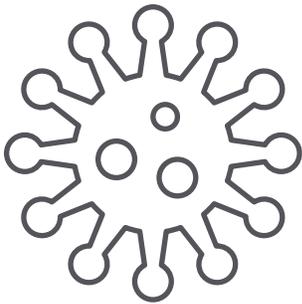
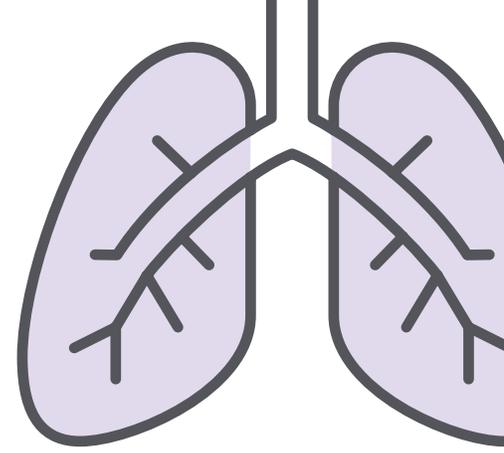
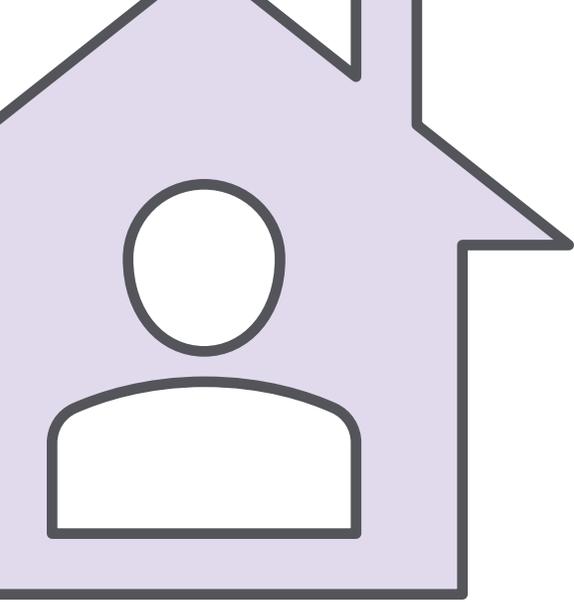


The COVID-19 Pandemic: Supporting LGBTQIA+ Patients | 2021



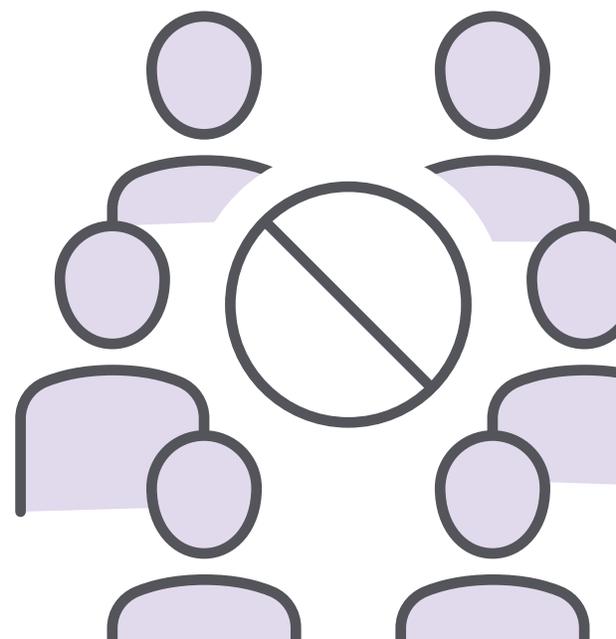
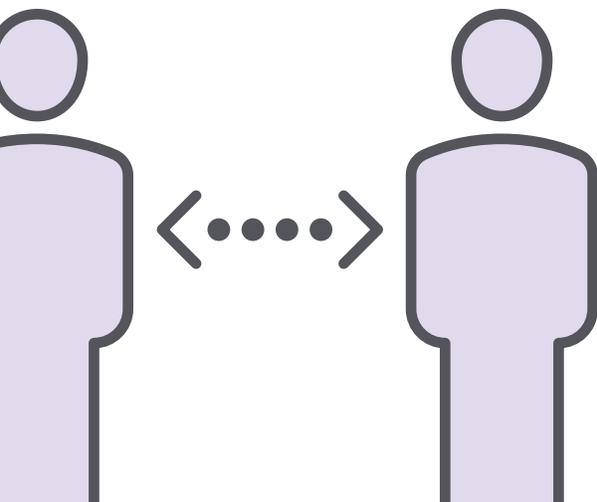
NATIONAL LGBTQIA+ HEALTH
EDUCATION CENTER

A PROGRAM OF THE FENWAY INSTITUTE



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to devastate communities across the U.S. Among those disparately affected are people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and all sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQIA+). Read below to find out how the pandemic affects LGBTQIA+ subpopulations, and what health centers can do to help patients receive the care they need during this challenging time.



THE PANDEMIC'S EFFECT ON LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE

LGBTQIA+ older adults

Social distancing and stay-at-home measures have exacerbated loneliness and isolation among all people, and especially older adults (people over 65 years).¹ LGBTQIA+ older adults are even more likely to live alone, be estranged from their families of origin, and not have children compared to non-LGBTQIA+ older adults.² Social isolation increases risks for poor general health, as well as mental health and substance use disorders,³ which are already more prevalent among LGBTQIA+ people.⁴ Additionally, LGBTQIA+ older adults may lack access to the internet or may have limited understanding of online technologies, making it challenging for them to engage in telehealth services or sign up for vaccination services.

LGBTQIA+ youth

Many LGBTQIA+ youth have families who do not support their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵ Limited to homes that do not accept them, these youth may experience serious psychological distress, harassment, and physical abuse from family members.⁵ LGBTQIA+ youth often depend on receiving social support and mental health support from LGBTQIA+-affirming school and community-based organizations;^{6,7} during the pandemic, however, these supports are primarily offered via online technology, if at all. Furthermore, the pandemic may be further increasing LGBTQIA+ youth's already disproportionate risk of homelessness and unstable housing.⁸

Transgender and gender diverse people

Transgender and gender diverse people are a highly marginalized population that also may suffer disparately from social isolation. As a population more likely to experience poverty and homelessness, and to engage in survival sex work, many transgender and gender diverse people depend on outreach services by community organizations for in-person social support, housing services, syringe services programs, and HIV prevention and care.^{9,10,11}

The pandemic has affected access to gender-affirming health care, such as hormone prescriptions and injections, and gender-affirming surgeries. Gender-affirming care is vital to the mental health and safety of many transgender and gender diverse people. Additionally, some trans masculine people use a chest binder to flatten their chest; however, some experiencing breathing difficulties associated with COVID-19 have had to stop binding until their symptoms improve.

LGBTQIA+ people living with HIV

HIV prevalence is disproportionately higher among gay/bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender women, and African American/Black and Hispanic/Latinx^a people.¹² Unless effectively treated with medication, HIV weakens the immune system, which may make a person more vulnerable to severe illness caused by COVID-19. Pandemic control measures are making it more difficult for people with HIV to access their medications, lab testing, and care visits.¹³

^a Latinx is used by some people of Latin American origin or descent as a gender-inclusive alternative to Latino and Latina.

SUPPORTING LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE DURING THE PANDEMIC

Telehealth

As for all patients, LGBTQIA+ people need the option to receive medical, behavioral health, dental, and social services via telehealth when possible. Some programs have been able to use the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act or other funding to purchase tablets and Broadband internet access services such as mobile hotspots for patients who cannot afford devices nor have internet access for telehealth services. For patients unfamiliar with online technologies, health centers can offer tutorials by phone on how to connect to the internet and virtual platforms.

Community and connectedness

Health centers and partnering LGBTQIA+ community organizations can work together to build engaging and affirming online support groups for LGBTQIA+ youth, older adults, transgender people, and other groups. Another option is to disseminate resources on national online social and support groups (see Resources).

Online social events for LGBTQIA+ people might include movie watch parties, online interactive games, and livestreaming of popular local musicians and House and Ball Community^b performers. Hosting small, outdoor, and masked events for low-income or socially isolated people who may lack access to digital media may also be an option in some regions of the country, depending on weather and local COVID-19-related policies.

In-person care and services

For patients without access to telehealth, it is critical to offer physically distant and masked in-person options in the health center. Another option is to consider allowing peer navigators, case managers, and other staff members who have positive existing relationships with patients to hand-deliver medications and care packages to patients at their homes. Brief, masked, and physically distanced home visits also allow for much-needed social connectedness. Home delivery is particularly effective for patients with ongoing medication needs, such as those taking HIV medications, PrEP, or gender-affirming hormones. Staff can also help patients with the process of signing up for prescriptions to be delivered via mail.

^b The House and Ball Community is a mostly Black and Latinx gay and transgender support network across multiple U.S. cities that celebrates all forms of gender and sexual expression and provides a sense of social and emotional belonging for marginalized youth. Houses serve as chosen families; Balls are elaborate, competitive events with aspects similar to fashion runway shows.

Sexual health counseling

Sexual contact with people outside one's household increases the risk of coronavirus transmission. Nonetheless, recommending abstinence is not a realistic strategy for most people, and may summon feelings of shame, trauma, and stigma reminiscent of the height of the AIDS crisis. A better approach is to focus on sexual harm reduction by 1) explaining to patients the levels of risk associated with specific sexual practices; 2) helping patients consider strategies that lower risk while addressing personal needs; and 3) offering resources on lower-risk activities.¹⁶

Safety at home

Given the potential for abusive and traumatic home environments for LGBTQIA+ youth, and for increased acts of intimate partner violence and violent hate crimes towards LGBTQIA+ adults, and especially transgender people, it is important to provide attention to surveillance, reporting, and intervention of child and elder abuse and violence during and after the pandemic (see Resources).^{7,17}

Education and awareness

Health centers can disseminate health-promoting resources through social media sites that are popular with their local LGBTQIA+ communities. Health centers can also offer online health classes and seminars on deep breathing techniques, meditation, and mindfulness. To build trust in healthcare and increase awareness of the importance of vaccination, health centers can host online discussions with LGBTQIA+ groups on the safety and benefits of the COVID-19 vaccines, as well as how these vaccines are being distributed.

Continue collecting and using SOGI data to advance equity

To understand how COVID-19 may be disproportionately affecting LGBTQIA+ populations, it is important for health centers to continue collecting, documenting, and using patient data on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) to guide priority-setting, resource allocation, and decision-making to reduce health disparities. By systematically collecting and analyzing SOGI data, health centers and public health agencies can recognize how LGBTQIA+ disparities intersect with racial/ethnic disparities, and can better determine ways to tailor strategies to improve testing, contact tracing, vaccination distribution, and care services for these populations.¹⁸

RELEVANT RESOURCES

- **COVID-19 Information for Health Centers and Partners**
HRSA Health Center Program information on COVID-19 (updated regularly)
bphc.hrsa.gov/emergency-response/coronavirus-info
- **National LGBTQIA+ Health Center**
Online education and resources on LGBTQIA+ health, including SOGI data collection
www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/resources
- **Advocates for Youth**
Resources to support the health and well-being of LGBTQIA+ youth, especially of color
www.advocatesforyouth.org/issue/lgbtq-health-and-rights
- **The Trevor Project**
Coping support for LGBTQIA+ youth
thetrevorproject.org
- **Genders and Sexualities Alliance**
Student-run organizations for LGBTQIA+ youth and allies
gsanetwork.org
- **Q Chat Space**
LGBTQIA+ youth online support groups
www.qchatspace.org
- **Trans Lifeline**
Peer support for the transgender community
translifeline.org
- **Audre Lorde Project**
Community organizing and wellness for LGBTQIA+ people of color
alp.org
- **National Resource Center on LGBT Aging - COVID-19 Resources**
Resources for LGBTQIA+ older adults
www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/resources.cfm?s=40
- **Futures without violence**
Resources for healing from trauma and violence
www.futureswithoutviolence.org/health/lgbtq-ipv
- **AHRQ intimate partner violence resources**
Resources and recommended screening tools relevant to partner violence
www.ahrq.gov/ncepcr/tools/healthier-pregnancy/fact-sheets/partner-violence.html
- **COVID-19 and Your Sexual Health**
Patient brochure on reducing risk for coronavirus transmission during sexual contact
fenwayhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/C19MC-11_Sex-and-COVID-19-Materials_flyer2.pdf

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