
Finding and Building a Therapeutic Relationship with your Healthcare Provider(s)

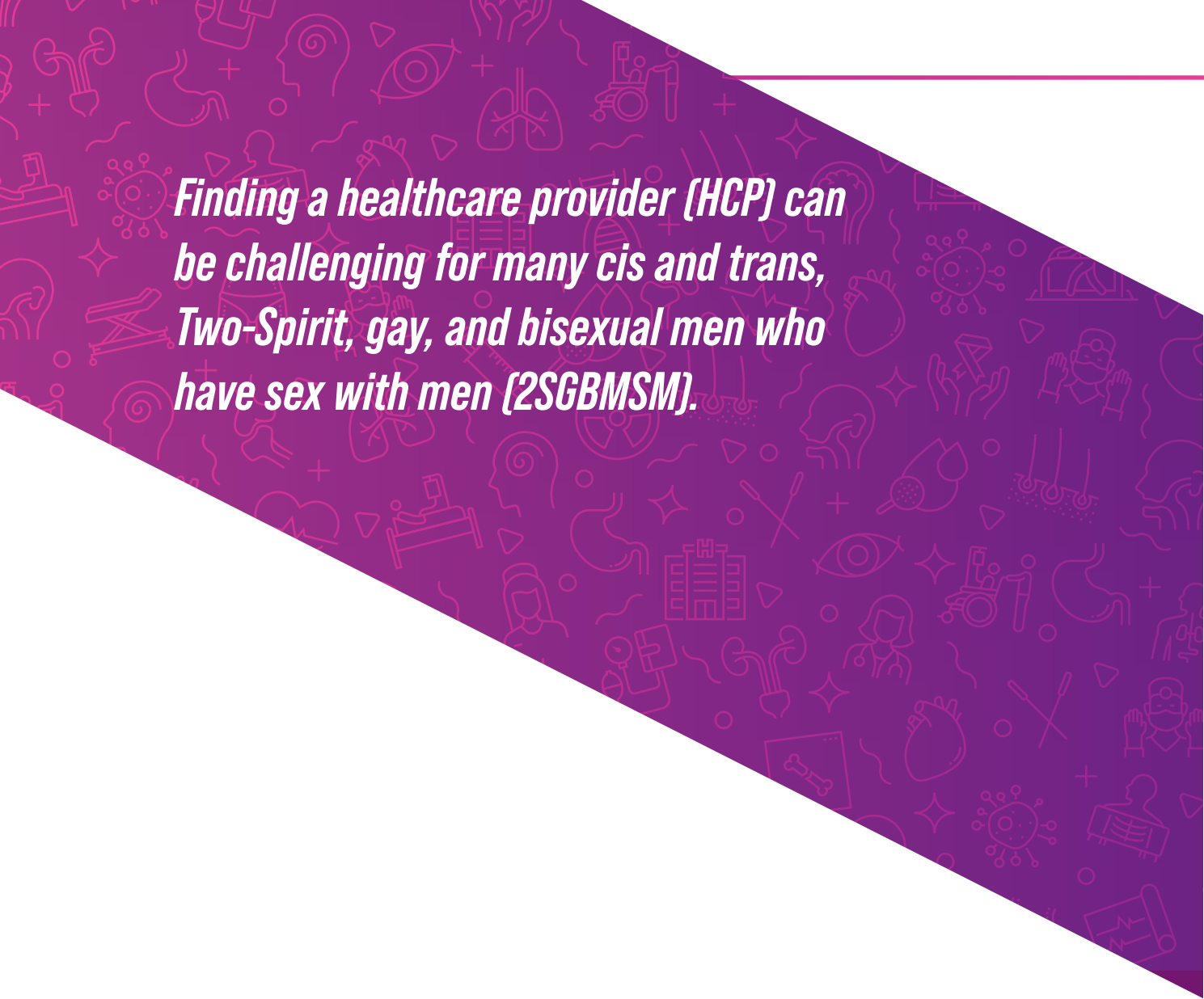
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Finding a healthcare provider (HCP) can be challenging for many cis and trans, Two-Spirit, gay, and bisexual men who have sex with men (2SGBMSM). For 2SGBMSM, personal disclosure of sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual behaviors and practices can be stressful and uncomfortable. The challenges of disclosure vary between provider and client. In one research study, 2SGBMSM reported confidentiality concerns or discrimination (Bernstein et al., 2008), which the authors hypothesized was related to providers' discomfort with same-sex sexual behavior and sexual practices as was demonstrated in other research. However, research also demonstrates that disclosure to healthcare providers was positively associated with uptake of HIV testing (Bernstein et al., 2008; Qaio et al., 2018).

Knowledge, skills, and experience of healthcare providers

When looking for a healthcare provider, it is essential to know that not all medical and nursing schools provide core curriculum training on 2SLGBTQ+ medical training to students (Schreiber, 2021; Wilder, 2021). Some HCPs will learn the knowledge and skills required to provide care to 2SGBMSM through their training. Other HCPs may have gained knowledge, experience, and skills to provide care to the 2SLGBTQ+ community through personal experiences, such as being members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community themselves. In general, most HCPs develop the cultural competencies and clinical skills once they are in practice, and such skills and knowledge vary amongst healthcare professionals. There are various 2SLGBTQ+ resources and continuing professional development training available for healthcare providers once out in practice.

Finding a healthcare provider

When looking for a family physician or nurse practitioner, check with the local community health centers, family health teams, local 2SLGBTQ+ services, and AIDS service organizations. Seek referrals and recommendations from friends, sexual partners, and romantic partner(s). Unwelcome healthcare centers create unsatisfactory care and poor health outcomes for 2SGBMSM (Friley & Venetis, 2021). Research has shown disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity can be complex and difficult (Friley & Venetis, 2021). The inability to disclose these pieces of information can prevent 2SGBMSM from feeling comfortable discussing sexual practices, which can prevent individuals from receiving appropriate health care. Some research has shown that over a third of LGBTQ adults avoid disclosing their LGBTQ identity to their medical providers (Rossman et al., 2017). Trans men have experienced “limited provider knowledge, stigmatizing attitudes, and invalidation of their gender identity” (Scheim et al., 2016), impacting their ability to disclose sexual health needs and access HIV testing. Concealing one’s identity is associated with worse health outcomes for 2SGBMSM. A critical step to good health care is being open with your healthcare provider (Human Rights Campaign, n.d).

Setting the foundation with the HCP

In the initial stage of finding a HCP, it is essential to be comfortable and open about your sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Establishing a foundation of honesty and authenticity with yourself will assist with being true to yourself when with your healthcare provider. Ask yourself what type of healthcare provider you are looking for. Do you want them to be strictly prescriptive? Do you want a warm, therapeutic relationship, or are you okay if they come across as distant? The characteristics of your HCP will influence the type of relationship you build with them over the long term.

Interview the healthcare provider

Prior to meeting a HCP, please write down your questions on a notepad and bring them with you to the initial appointment. Ask prospective HCP(s) about their experience, knowledge, and skills in working with 2SGBMSM clients. It is your health, and you will need to feel safe and comfortable with the care the HCP would provide you. Some HCPs may not be experienced but may be open to learning about 2SGBMSM health needs. This type of reassurance can help you feel confident that you will receive good cultural and clinical care. However, in this circumstance, it may be particularly important for you to also take time to learn about the healthcare needs of 2SGBMSM people and inform your HCP as appropriate.

Some areas of Ontario have fewer HCPs taking new patients. Sometimes there may only be one local HCP available, but even when options are limited, asking questions about their experience, knowledge, and motivation to learn more is still advised. Adjust the questions below as relevant to the interview with the HCP. An excellent resource, "Do Ask, Do Tell" by the Fenway Institute, may be beneficial to assist with finding the correct HCP for you.



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A sample list of questions to discuss with the HCP

The questions below can be discussed over the phone or in person. If in-person, feel free to bring a supportive friend. Take notes, as you can review the responses later to decide which HCP(s) may be the best fit for you. Here are some sample questions that may be helpful for this purpose:

- Do you currently provide, or have you previously provided, care to GBMSM?
- Can I talk to you about various sexual practices, such as anal sex (including topping and bottoming), oral sex, etc.?
- Are you comfortable screening me for STIs (including throat and rectal swabs when indicated), HIV, and HCV and providing safer sex counseling and education?
- I am in a serodiscordant relationship as I do not have HIV and my partner is living with HIV. Can you provide care for me?
- I recently tested positive for HIV. Are you able to provide HIV care and treatment and monitor my blood test results?
- What is your knowledge and comfort on substance use—including party and play (PnP)—and harm reduction?
- Can I receive the HPV vaccine Gardasil-9 (if age qualifies < 26 years), and also vaccines against hepatitis A and hepatitis B? (Note: If older than 26 years, ask if you can receive Gardasil 9 as some guidelines recommend up to 45 years of age)

- Do you feel comfortable assessing and managing anal health, including doing a digital rectal anal exam when appropriate?
- Can you refer me to a mental health counselor knowledgeable of 2SGBMSM's mental and emotional health needs?
- I am in a same-sex or queer relationship; my partner is also looking for a healthcare provider. Can you take my partner as a client too?

Additional question for trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming persons:

- Do you have clients who are trans, non-binary, and/or gender non-conforming?
- Are you comfortable with the concepts of pronouns, gender identity, and gender expression?
- What is your comfort, knowledge, and experience on sexual health for trans and non-binary persons?
- Can we discuss topics such as legal name and gender marker changes on ID, chest binding, and other forms of social transitioning, use of hormones, and/or top or bottom [transition-related surgeries](#) and [post-surgical care](#)?
- Can we talk about reproductive health or sperm/egg freezing, as I may want to have children later after starting hormones and/or after bottom surgery?

Making a decision and building your relationship with the HCP

Once you have met and had a conversation with the HCP, review your notes. Make an informed decision on who you are most comfortable with. When you have decided on the HCP, book your medical appointment to discuss your health care concerns and the assessments you may need. If you are unsure of something that the HCP says, ask the HCP to explain further. Thank the HCP for their participation in your optimal health care. Note that it may take months to build a therapeutic relationship, but ideally, you'll feel more and more comfortable with this HCP over time.

Resources

National LGBTQ Health Education Center. Do Ask, Do Tell: talking to your healthcare provider about being LGBTQ. (n.d) Retrieved June 20 from <https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/DADT-Brochure-Final-English.pdf>

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Fast Facts about LGBTQ+ Care for Nurse. How to Deliver Culturally competent and Inclusive care. Retrieved June 28 from [The ABCs of LGBTQ](#)

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