

# Why do gay and lesbian people get more migraines?

September 28 2020, by Alan Mozes, Healthday Reporter

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Could migraine risk be affected by sexual orientation? A new study

suggests that the answer may be yes.

After tracking migraines among thousands of American adults, investigators found that men and women who identify as gay, bisexual *or* mostly but not exclusively heterosexual have a notably higher migraine risk.

"Lesbian, gay or [bisexual individuals](#) were 58% more likely to experience a migraine compared to heterosexual individuals," said lead author Dr. Jason Nagata, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco.

Nearly a third of gay, lesbian and bisexual study participants had experienced a migraine, Nagata noted.

"We also found that individuals who identified as mostly heterosexual but with some same-sex attractions were more likely to experience a migraine, compared to those who identified as exclusively heterosexual," he added.

Migraines are a type of headache that is often accompanied by nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light or sound. It often produces a throbbing pain on one side of the head.

The study team noted that migraines are the fifth-leading reason for [emergency room visits](#) in the United States, affecting about 1 in 6 Americans.

The Migraine Research Foundation estimates that 18% of American women and 6% of men get migraines. Nine in 10 migraine patients have a family history of the headaches.

For the new study, researchers looked at nearly 10,000 men and women

between 31 and 42 years of age. All were part of a larger nationwide health study between 2016 and 2018.

About 86% identified as straight; 10% said they were "mostly" straight; and just over 4% said they were lesbian, gay or bisexual.

In the end, the team determined that LGBT and "mostly" straight participants had a higher migraine risk than exclusively straight participants.

On the question of why, Nagata said more research will be needed to tease out the underlying causes. But he noted that "lesbian, gay and [bisexual people](#) may experience homophobia and discrimination, which can lead to stress, and trigger a migraine."

Dr. Richard Lipton, director of the Montefiore Headache Center at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City, reacted to the findings with surprise.

"We know that migraine prevalence peaks in midlife, is three times higher in women than in men, [and] higher in low-income groups than in high-income groups," noted Lipton, who was not part of the study. "This is the first data I have seen stratified by heterosexual vs. LGB status."

His take?

"It is interesting that the 'mostly heterosexual group' and the LGB groups looked so similar," Lipton said. "It is possible that the 'mostly [heterosexual](#) group' has a similar distribution of sexual minority stress as the LGB group."

While agreeing that the sexual minority stress theory is one plausible explanation, he stressed that the study's observations so far are "certainly

not proven."

To get more concrete proof, Lipton argued, "we would want to measure sexual minority stress, and [then] see if it predicts [migraine](#) prevalence in the LGB group."

The findings were published as a letter Sept. 28 in the online edition of *JAMA Neurology*.

**More information:** Learn more about migraines at the [Migraine Research Foundation](#).

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