

What is safer sex?

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Having safer sex attempts to reduce (and eliminate) the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and blood borne viruses such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis B. There are many ways to have safer sex and using condoms is the best way.

Sexual contacts and their STI and HIV risks without condom use

- Masturbation and mutual masturbation: There is no risk for STIs or HIV, if there is no exchange of body fluids
- Oral sex: Very low risk of STI or HIV transmission. Occasionally oral herpes can be passed on through oral sex
- Vaginal and anal intercourse: High risk for STIs and HIV.

What infections can you get from unprotected sex?

Bacterial infections passed on with unprotected vaginal or anal sex include: chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis and trichomonas. Viral infections include: HIV, hepatitis A and B, genital herpes and genital warts (human papilloma virus).

How are these infections passed on?

There are a number of ways STIs and HIV can be passed on. Some are passed on by genital skin-to-skin contact (herpes, warts and syphilis). With HIV, chlamydia, hepatitis B and gonorrhoea, there needs to be an exchange of body fluids. Condoms provide excellent protection against these serious STIs.

When to use condoms

When entering a new relationship it is best to use condoms for a period of time before negotiating unprotected sex with a partner.

When to stop using condoms

As HIV can take up to 3 months before the antibody test is accurate, many people wait for 3 months to stop condom use. The 3 month period of condom use can allow for discussion to occur between partners and prepare for the testing and screening process.

Something to consider

To protect yourself and your partner a condom needs to be used if sex occurs outside of the relationship. Sometimes it can be good to talk about this possibility before it occurs.

When to go to a doctor or a sexual health clinic:

- Symptoms: You should have a sexual health screen if you have any symptoms such as lumps, blisters, lesions, pain (when urinating or during intercourse), or any abnormal discharge from the vagina, penis or anus
- If a condom breaks: If a condom breaks during sex, see a doctor or a sexual health centre. In situations of very high risk for HIV, postexposure prophylaxis (tablets to reduce the chances of acquiring HIV) can be given within the first 72 hours after sex. The morning after pill (to avoid pregnancy) is also available to take within 72 hours after sex

- For a 'check up': Some STIs do not have any signs or symptoms, so it is important to have tests for STIs and HIV if there is any risk of contracting them. Every person should be tested when entering a new relationship. Many people decide to use condoms and wait 3 months before going for a 'check up', when tests are more accurate.

How to use a condom

Condoms should be checked for their 'use by' date. When opened hold the tip between the fingers and roll down over the penis. A water based lubricant can be used inside and outside the condom for lubrication and increased pleasure. If uncircumcised, roll the foreskin back before putting the condom on.

(See Patient education 'How to use a condom' page 324 this issue.)

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