

Safe sex

'Safe sex' is having sexual contact while minimising the risk that you will get a sexually transmissible infection (STI). Sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners is considered to be safe sex.

Unsafe sex may pass on STIs such as chlamydia, HIV or gonorrhoea, or cause unplanned pregnancy. Safe sex is also called 'safer sex' to point out that only avoiding sex altogether is 100 per cent safe.

How to stay safe

Having sex with only one partner, when neither of you have any STIs, is the safest way to have sex. If you have more than one partner or have not been tested for STIs, other suggestions include:

- **Be infection-free** – get tested for STIs and have treatment if necessary. Avoid sexual contact until the doctor or nurse tells you that you are no longer infectious.
- **Use male condoms** – if used correctly, condoms can dramatically reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancy and most STIs.
- **Use female barrier methods** – these are the female condom, which resembles a regular condom but is inserted into the vagina, and the dental dam, which is a sheet of latex worn over the female genitals during oral sex.
- **Use other barrier methods** – for example, use condoms on dildos and other penetrative sex toys and wear a latex glove for digital penetration of the vagina or anus.

Condoms are not 100% safe

Condoms, even when used correctly, don't guarantee 100 per cent protection against STIs or unplanned pregnancy. Issues to consider include:

- Sex with a condom may still spread an infection if the condom does not fully cover the infected area. For example, the genital wart virus may be on the scrotum.
- Some infections, such as pubic lice and scabies, are spread by close contact, regardless of whether or not a condom is used.
- A condom may break, particularly if it has not been stored properly or the right (water based) lubricant has not been used. Do not expose a condom to prolonged heat. Don't use a condom that is past its use-by date. Don't try to re-apply a used condom and don't use oil based lubricants like baby oil and Vaseline.

Safe sexual activities

Sexual contact that carries a low risk of STI transmission includes:

- Kissing
- Cuddling
- Massage
- Kissing unbroken skin
- Masturbation
- Mutual masturbation
- Ejaculating on unbroken skin.

Low-risk sexual activities

Activities that probably won't involve the exchange of bodily fluids include:

- **Open-mouthed kissing** – also called deep or French kissing. This type of kissing is fine if neither of you have a mouth sore and no blood is present.

- **Sexual intercourse using barrier contraception** – such as a condom or female condom. Remember that a diaphragm (a cap worn high in the vagina to cover the cervix) offers good protection against pregnancy but low protection against STIs.

High-risk or unsafe sexual activities

Unsafe sex outside of a monogamous relationship is risky. Examples of unsafe sexual activities include:

- Having sex without a male condom or female condom
- Withdrawing the penis before ejaculation instead of using condoms (pre-ejaculatory fluid may be infectious and can also contain sperm)
- Trying to re-use a condom or using a condom that is past its use-by date
- Using a condom incorrectly or continuing to have sex once the condom is broken
- Having unprotected oral sex, which can spread some STIs: for example, herpes and gonorrhoea
- Doing anything that involves blood-to-blood contact
- Getting bodily fluids like menstrual blood, semen or vaginal fluids inside another person's body (for example, mouth, vagina or anus).

Factors that increase the risk of unsafe sex

Some of the factors that can make unsafe sex more likely include:

- Being drunk
- Using drugs
- Thinking that it's okay 'just this once'
- Believing that you can tell if someone has an STI.

Reject the myths

Some people believe, or may try to make you believe, all sort of myths about safe sex including:

- Planning ahead for sex ruins the mood
- You can tell if someone looks like they don't have an STI
- Practicing safe sex implies that one of us has an STI
- Practicing safe sex implies that one of us is an intravenous drug user
- Lesbians don't get STIs
- Condoms ruin the feel of sex
- Buying condoms is embarrassing.

Overcome safe sex barriers

Suggestions include:

- Be prepared for safe sex; it doesn't have to be a passion-killer. Carry condoms in your wallet or purse and keep them handy at home so that you don't have to interrupt having sex to hunt around for one.
- Involve condoms in foreplay; for example, a woman could put the condom on the man using her hands and mouth.
- Don't think you can tell if someone has an STI just by looking at them. Some STIs, such as HIV or chlamydia, don't have any obvious signs.
- Educate yourself about STIs. Anyone who has sex is at risk. Browse the Better Health Channel for more information on a wide range of STIs.
- Be mature about STIs and reassure yourself and your partner that an STI is not a moral judgement of character but an infection like any other. Having an STI does not mean that you are 'dirty' or 'cheap'.
- Buy condoms from vending machines in some public toilets, or from mail order sites, if you feel too embarrassed to buy them in a chemist or supermarket.
- Learn how to use condoms. They may take a little getting used to, but it's better than catching an STI.
- Have STI tests if you are in a committed relationship and you want to have sex without a condom. Both partners should be tested. Think of STI testing as a sign of love and respect for each other.

What to do if you have unsafe sex

Suggestions include:

- Avoid using a douche in the vagina or rectum as the irritation to delicate tissues could increase the risk of infection.
- See your doctor promptly for testing.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
- Well Women's Clinic, Royal Women's Hospital Tel. (03) 9344 2288 or 9344 2183
- Nurse on Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Blood Borne Viruses/Sexually Transmissible Infections Program, Department of Human Services Victoria Tel. (03) 9096 0000
- Victorian HIV/AIDS Service, The Alfred Hospital Outpatient Clinic Tel. (03) 9276 6081

Things to remember

- 'Safe sex' is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners.
- If used correctly, condoms can dramatically reduce the risk of most sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy.
- Being clear of STIs and having sex with one partner is the ideal form of safe sex.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

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