Safe sex
Safe sex is having sexual contact while protecting yourself and your sexual partner against sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy. Safe contact that doesn’t involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners is considered to be safe sex. Unsafe sex may put you or your partner at risk of STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, Mycoplasma genitalium, HIV or hepatitis B, or may result in an unplanned pregnancy.

Condoms and safe sex

Condoms offer the best available protection against STIs by acting as a physical barrier to prevent the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners. Safe sex is also called ‘safer sex’ to highlight the fact that condoms and other barrier methods are not 100 per cent effective in preventing STIs. However, condoms do offer the best available protection when used correctly.

For vaginal, anal and oral sex, you should use condoms. Points to keep in mind include:

- The male condom is a fine, strong, latex-rubber sheath available in a variety of sizes and styles. Condoms made from polyurethane are available for people allergic to latex.
- The female condom resembles a regular condom made of polyurethane, but is designed to fit inside the vagina. The female condom is pre-lubricated and is ‘one size fits all’.
- You should use other barrier methods – for example, condoms on vibrators and other penetrative sex toys, a latex glove for digital penetration of the vagina or anus, and a dental dam (a sheet of latex worn over the female genitals) during oral sex.
- 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.
- To be effective, condoms must be used from the start of sex to the very end as STIs can be transmitted via pre-ejaculate.
- Always use a new, lubricated condom every time you have sex. Check the use-by date and open the packet, being careful not to tear the condom with fingernails, jewellery or teeth.
- If you need extra lubricant, use only water-based lubricants. Other lubricants can damage the condom.

Effectiveness of condoms

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

- Sex using a condom may still spread an infection if the condom does not fully cover the infected area. For example, some infections such as pubic lice, scabies, genital warts and herpes are spread by close skin-to-skin contact. Condoms provide some protection against these STIs, but not full protection as they do not cover the entire genital skin area.
- A condom may break, particularly if it has not been stored properly or the right lubricant has not been used. This is why you should always use water-based lubricant. Oil-based lubricants are associated with condom breakage and should not be 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 – they are designed for one use only.

Other tips for safer sex

Safer sex is also about having sex when you and your partner are ready, and having sex that’s enjoyable, respectful and protected. Ways that you can practise safer sex include:

- Having sex with only one partner, when neither of you has any STIs, is the safest way to have sex.
- Be STI free by getting tested for common infections and having treatment if necessary, especially if you have a new partner. Avoid sexual contact until the doctor or nurse tells you that you are no longer infectious and until both you and your partner have been treated.
- Communicate with your sexual partner about what you want and enjoy sexually.
- Be aware that drugs and alcohol may affect your ability to make good decisions. Protect yourself from having sex that you might regret or were pressured into because you weren’t thinking properly.
- Use other types of contraception in addition to a condom to avoid unplanned pregnancy.

Safe sexual activities

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

- kissing although recent studies have shown that deep throat kissing (French kissing) may be associated with the spread of gonorrhoea
- cuddling
• massage
• masturbation
• mutual masturbation
• ejaculating on unbroken skin
• sexual intercourse using barrier contraception – such as a condom or female condom.

**High-risk or unsafe sexual activities**

Unsafe sex outside of a monogamous relationship increases your risk of getting a STI. Examples of unsafe sexual activities include:

- having sex without a male or female condom
- withdrawing the penis before ejaculation instead of using condoms (pre-ejaculatory fluid may be infectious and can also contain sperm resulting in pregnancy)
- 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
- exchanging bodily fluids like menstrual blood, semen or vaginal fluids inside another person’s body (for example, mouth, vagina or anus).

**Increasing the risk of unsafe sex**

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

- being drunk (which may lead to you being less careful)
- using recreational drugs
- feeling pressured to have sex
- thinking that it’s okay ‘just this once’
- believing that you can tell if someone has an STI because they will have symptoms.

**Safe sex myths**

Some people believe, or may try to persuade you of, various myths about safe sex, such as:

- Planning ahead for sex ruins the mood.
- You can tell by the way someone looks that they do or 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.
- Taking the pill means I practice safe sex.
- Condoms ruin the feel of sex.
- Buying condoms is embarrassing.

**Overcoming barriers to safe sex**

Safe sex doesn’t have to be a drag. Tips 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 look for one.
- If you find condoms reduce the pleasure that you or your partner experience, drop a bit of water-based lubricant in the tip of the condom for extra feeling and sensitivity.
- Learn how to use condoms. They may take a little getting used to, but it’s better than catching an STI.
- Involve condoms in foreplay.
- If you feel too embarrassed to buy condoms in a pharmacy or supermarket, buy them from vending machines in some public toilets, from mail-order sites or grab a handful from a community health centre or sexual health centre.
- Hormonal contraceptives, such as the oral contraceptive pill, only provide protection against unplanned pregnancy. They provide no protection against STIs.
- Prioritise your sexual health – it is important.
- Don’t think you can tell if someone has an STI just by looking at them. Most STIs don’t have any obvious signs.
- Educate yourself about STIs. Anyone who has sex is at risk.
- 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’.
- Have STI tests if you are in a relationship and you want to have sex without a condom. Both partners should be tested. Think of STI testing as a sign of respect for each other.

**What to do if you have unsafe sex**

If you have had unsafe sex:

- avoid vaginal or rectal ‘douching’ (washing out or irrigating these areas with water or other fluids) as the irritation to delicate tissues could increase the risk of infection
- make sure you are not at risk of pregnancy. Consider taking the emergency contraceptive pill (within 72 hours is best, but it can be taken with 120 hours of unprotected sex or a broken condom if no other form of contraception was used)
- see your GP promptly to be tested for STIs
- consider post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) to prevent HIV, if you are a man who has had unprotected anal intercourse with another man. Call the PEP line to assess whether you require post-exposure prophylaxis.

**Where to get help**

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
• Your doctor / GP
• Your school nurse or school welfare coordinator
• Some secondary schools provide access to an adolescent health trained GP on site
• Your local community health service
• Family Planning Victoria’s Action Centre Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 (also is youth friendly)
• Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100
• Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9344 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
• Thornbury Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council) Tel. (03) 9865 6700 or 1800 134 840
• The Centre Clinic, St Kilda Tel. (03) 9525 5866
• Equinox Gender Diverse Health Centre Tel. (03) 9416 2889
• PRONTO! Tel. (03) 9416 2889
• Ballarat Community Health Sexual Health Clinic Tel. (03) 5338 4500
• Bendigo Community Health Sexual Health Clinic Tel. (03) 5434 4500 or (03) 5448 1600
• Gateway Health Clinic 15, Wodonga Tel. (02) 6022 8888 or 1800657 522
• Sunraysia Community Health Services Tel. (03) 5022 5444
• Barwon Health Sexual Health Clinic Tel. (03) 5226 7489
• Victorian Supercare Pharmacies
• 1800MyOptions Tel 1800 696 784 is a statewide phone service for information about sexual health as well as contraception and pregnancy options

References
• Australian STI Management Guidelines, 2016, Australasian Sexual Health Alliance.

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3/4 Questions
Sexually transmissible infections

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- STIs explained
- Preventing STIs
- STI conditions
- HIV and AIDS

STIs explained

Preventing STIs

- Safe sex
  Safe sex is sexual contact that does not involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners...

STI conditions

- Chlamydia
  Chlamydia is often called the 'silent infection' because most people do not realise they have it...
- Genital herpes
  Many people with genital herpes are not aware that they have the infection, because they have no symptoms...
- Genital warts
  Genital warts are one of the most common sexually transmissible infections...
- Gonorrhoea
  Gonorrhoea, also spelt gonorrhea, affects both men and women and is transmitted during sex, it may lead to infertility in women if left untreated...
- Hepatitis B
  Hepatitis B is a viral infection that affects the liver and can lead to serious illness or death...
- HIV and women – having children
  Women living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves if...
- Molluscum contagiosum
  Molluscum contagiosum can be mistaken for genital warts or pimples, check with your doctor for an accurate diagnosis...
Salpingitis

Salpingitis is one of the most common causes of female infertility and may permanently damage the fallopian tubes.

Syphilis

If you are infected with syphilis and do not seek treatment, you can remain infectious for up to two years.

Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis during pregnancy may lead to low birth weight babies and prematurity.

HIV and AIDS

- **HIV**
  
  In Australia, HIV is most commonly spread when having sex without a condom and when sharing needles and other injecting equipment.

- **HIV and men - safer sex**
  
  HIV transmission can occur from men to women and from women to men as well as between men who have sex with men.

- **HIV and women – having children**
  
  Women living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves if...

- **HIV and women – safer sex**
  
  Practising safe sex is important, whether your partner is HIV-positive or not.

- **HIV, hepatitis and sport**
  
  People with HIV or hepatitis B or C participate in a wide range of sports without restrictions, and the risk of transmission to another player is extremely small.

- **HIV - infection control in hospitals**

  Hospitals follow strict infection control guidelines to prevent the spread of HIV to patients.

**Related Information**

- **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**
  
  It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

- **HIV and men - safer sex**
  
  HIV transmission can occur from men to women and from women to men as well as between men who have sex with men.

- **HIV and women – safer sex**
  
  Practising safe sex is important, whether your partner is HIV-positive or not.

- **Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)**
  
  Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).

- **Sex – are you ready**

  It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

**Home**

**Related information on other websites**

- [Child and Youth Health SA, Teen health ages 12–25 – Safer sex](#)
- [Child and Youth Health SA, Young adult health ages 18–25 – Safer sex](#)
- [Connect – HIV & Sexual Health](#)
- [Family Planning Victoria Action Centre](#)
- [PEP: Post-exposure prophylaxis](#)
- [Play safe, NSW Health](#)
- [ReachOut.com – Contraception and pregnancy](#)
- [Women's Health Information Centre](#)

**Content Partner**

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

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