

Condoms

Last updated August 2011/ Due for review March 2013

Condoms are used during sex to provide a barrier. When used properly and consistently, they can prevent HIV and many other sexually transmitted infections. They are also a good way form of contraception. This factsheet describes male condoms, but you should also find out about female condoms. There's more on male and female condoms in our booklet *HIV & sex*.

Choosing condoms

It's important to choose good quality condoms. Check for a quality mark such as the BSI Kitemark or the European CE mark. Condoms are marked with a 'best before' date. If this date has passed, throw the condoms away.

Condoms come in a range of shapes, sizes, thicknesses, flavours, textures and colours. Though the standard size will fit most men, smaller and larger condoms are available. It's important to use a brand that fits well. Some condoms are only designed to enhance sexual pleasure and do not act as an effective, protective barrier. Check the information on the package.

Condoms and anal sex

Research has shown that normal strength condoms can be safely used for anal sex.

Using condoms correctly

Condoms come rolled up in a plastic or foil wrapper. When opening the wrapper be careful not to tear the condom. Put the condom on when the penis is hard, but before penetration begins. Once the penis is hard, unroll the condom all the way down the shaft of the penis. Make sure there is no air in the condom. Condoms come with a teat or a plain end. In either case, it is important to allow enough room for the semen to be able to fill the end of the condom. If you leave air in the end of the condom, it may break when you ejaculate into it.

Condoms can slip off or split during sex, particularly if they are not used correctly.

After ejaculating, withdraw the penis before it goes soft. Hold on to the base of the condom as you withdraw. Never re-use condoms.

Choosing a lubricant

Lubricants can be used to assist penetration in both vaginal and anal sex. The vagina usually lubricates itself when a woman is sexually aroused, and so you may not need additional lubricant for vaginal sex unless the vagina feels dry.

However, you should always use lubricant for anal sex. Most condoms come pre-lubricated, but this is not adequate for anal sex and may not be for vaginal sex either.

Condoms should be used with a water-based, or preferably silicone-based lubricant. Never use oil-based lubricants such as body lotions, massage oils, or *Vaseline*, as these weaken the latex and can cause the condom to break. Apply lubricant to the outside of the condom (once you're wearing it) and to the entrance to the rectum or vagina. Don't put lubricant inside the condom as this can cause it to slip off during sex.

Spermicides

Some condoms are coated with a spermicide to assist contraception.

However, some spermicides can cause irritation in the rectum or vagina and therefore increase the chance of passing on any infections which might be present. Excessive use of a spermicide called nonoxynol-9 (found on *Durex Extra Safe*, *Mates Natural*, *Mates Conform* and *Mates Ultra* condoms, and in some lubricants) is not recommended for this reason, and is best avoided.

Latex allergies

Most condoms are made of latex (rubber). If you are allergic to latex, there are some condoms available which are latex free, including *Durex Avanti*. *Avanti* is made of plastic rather than latex and can therefore be used with oil-based lubricants.

Where to get condoms

Condoms are on sale in chemists, shops and supermarkets, and on the internet. HIV clinics and genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics provide free condoms, as do family planning clinics. Our online tool, the e-atlas, is a good place to start looking for local services: www.aidsmap.com/e-atlas.

Condoms are also available at many gay venues, but not all, so take them with you to be sure.

You can also buy condoms cheaply from this NHS website: www.freedoms-shop.nhs.uk

Advice on using condoms

If you're having difficulties with condoms, such as breakages, irritation in the genital area, or perhaps you're finding it difficult to negotiate using condoms with your partner, you can speak to a health adviser in your HIV or GUM clinic. Health advisers are trained to offer advice and support on sexual health.