

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**CONDOMS & OTHER BARRIER METHODS:  
A GUIDE TO SAFER SEX**

**WHAT IS SAFER SEX?**

Safer sex is not about eliminating sex from your life. It is about respect for yourself and respect for your partner—talking about sex, knowing how to protect yourself, and taking precautions every time.

Safer sex means enjoying sex without getting or giving sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Some STIs can be treated and cured easily. Others have no cure but can be controlled with treatment. For more information about STIs, refer to our STI brochure at <https://health.students.vcu.edu/patient-resources/sexual-health/> or visit <https://www.cdc.gov/std/>.

Remember that you are the one responsible for protecting yourself in every sexual relationship.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS?**

To make physical intimacy as enjoyable and safe as possible, know which types of intimate contact are higher risk for STI transmission and which are lower risk. The chart below ranks sexual practices by their degree of risk, assuming no protection is used.\* Activities that involve direct exposure to a partner's semen, vaginal secretions, or blood are more dangerous.

<b>HIGH RISK</b>	<< Receptive anal intercourse
	<< Receptive vaginal intercourse
	<< Insertive anal intercourse
	<< Insertive vaginal intercourse
	<< Oral sex on a man with ejaculation
	<< Oral sex on a man without ejaculation
<b>LOWER RISK</b>	<< Oral sex on a woman
	<< Oral-anal contact
	<< Intimate kissing
	<< Touching, massage
	<< Masturbation
<b>NO RISK</b>	<< Talking, fantasy

\* Adapted from American College Health Association, [Making Sex Safer](#), 1996.

**WHAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD I TAKE?**

- So now that you're in the know, choose lower-risk sexual activities.
- Know your partner. Don't be afraid to ask about your partner's health and sexual history. Communicate with your partner about your concerns, fears, desires, and choices.
- Limit your number of partners. Be choosy about whom you want to be intimate with. Even if you have not had many partners, you can still contract STIs. All it takes is one incident of unprotected sex.
- Avoid mixing sex with alcohol or drugs. Your judgement will be affected, which can lead to problems like choosing a risky partner, forgetting to use a condom, or using a condom incorrectly.
- Use protection every time. Don't depend exclusively on talking with your partner to protect yourself from STIs; your partner may not realize or reveal issues that could put you at risk. Many STIs have no symptoms but can still be passed from person to person.
  - Latex barriers like condoms are highly effective when used consistently and correctly. That means every time. From beginning to end.
  - Other forms of birth control like the pill, the Depo shot, Nexplanon, or an IUD (intra-uterine device) are great for pregnancy prevention, but they do not offer protection from STIs.
  - Dental dams and finger cots are other effective barrier methods for STI prevention. If you are not familiar with these options, keep reading.

## **MALE CONDOMS**

Here's a quick tutorial on male condoms, the most popular form of birth control and STI prevention out there.

- **Latex vs non-latex:** Latex condoms are the most common, but non-latex types are available for those with latex allergies or other concerns. Non-latex condoms are made from natural lambskin, polyurethane, or polyisoprene. The pros and cons of each are listed below.
- **Pregnancy prevention:** All types of male condoms offer the same statistical effectiveness against pregnancy. Only about 2% of couples using condoms consistently and correctly will experience a failure in the first year of usage. The safest way to prevent pregnancy is to use a combination of hormonal birth control with condoms (or another backup method).
- **STI prevention:** Latex, polyurethane, and polyisoprene condoms protect against STIs, like HIV, hepatitis, and herpes. However lambskin condoms DO NOT protect against STIs.
- **Cost:** Condoms are pretty inexpensive. The Student Health Pharmacy offers a variety of condoms at a low price (6 latex condoms/\$3 or 6 non-latex condoms/\$5). Students can order **free condoms** from the Well via their **Condom Concierge program** at <https://thewell.vcu.edu/programs/condom-concierge/>. **Check out [condomfinder.org](https://condomfinder.org) to find more free condoms near you.**

### ❖ **LATEX CONDOMS**

- Latex condoms are available in a variety of shapes, lengths, widths, and textures. Experiment with different types to find the best fit or check out [bedsider.org](https://bedsider.org) (search "condom size") for tips about finding the right fit.
- Latex thicknesses also vary. Some condoms are thinner to enhance sensation. Thicker condoms are a better choice for sexual activities like anal intercourse, where increased friction and other factors may make condoms more likely to break.
- Flavored condoms can make oral sex more enjoyable.
- **Latex condoms can only be used with water-based lubricants.** Oil-based lubricants (such as petroleum jelly, mineral oil, or cold cream) will break down latex material and also increase the chance of a condom slipping off.

### ❖ **NON-LATEX CONDOMS**

Non-latex condoms are good choices for anyone allergic to latex or if oil-based lube is preferred. These condoms are usually made from natural lambskin, polyurethane, or polyisoprene.

#### **Lambskin**

- **Lambskin condoms protect against pregnancy but do not protect against STIs.** The pores in lambskin are small enough to block sperm but too big for blocking infectious particles.
- Lambskin provides more sensation and is less allergenic than latex.
- Lambskin condoms do not stretch as much as latex ones.
- Lambskin is more expensive than other condom types.

#### **Polyurethane**

- Polyurethane condoms are made from a type of plastic. **They are a good choice for people who are allergic or sensitive to latex.**
- They are thinner and stronger than most latex condoms and have little or no smell. They heat better than latex (which may increase sensation) and are not damaged by oil-based lubricants.
- More lubrication may be needed because polyurethane is less flexible than latex. Polyurethane may also have higher slippage and breakage rates.

#### **Polyisoprene**

- Polyisoprene is a synthetic version of latex rubber and is another option for those with latex allergies. However, because polyisoprene is similar to latex, there is a chance that someone allergic to latex may also be allergic to polyisoprene.
- Polyisoprene condoms are softer and stretchier than polyurethane condoms.
- Durex (Avanti Bare) and Lifestyles (Skyn) are two available brands.

## **SPERMICIDES**

Some condoms come with a spermicidal lubricant. The active ingredient in over-the-counter spermicides in the US is nonoxynol-9 (N-9).

- N-9 used alone is effective for preventing pregnancy but **does not protect against STIs, including HIV.**
- Studies show that N-9 may actually increase the risk of getting HIV from an infected partner due to tissue irritation in the vagina and rectum.
- **For women at low-risk for HIV and other STIs, N-9 is considered to be safe for pregnancy prevention.** It is not recommended for use in those at high-risk for STIs.

## **CONDOM SHOPPING & STORAGE GUIDE**

1. **Choose latex, polyurethane, or polyisoprene condoms for STI prevention.**
2. **Check the expiration date.** Don't purchase or use condoms after that date.
3. **Consider buying separate lubricant** if the condoms are not pre-lubricated. Choose only water-based lubricants for latex condoms. Lubricants help prevent STIs by keeping condoms from breaking and decreasing tissue irritation. They also increase sensation for the insertive partner.
4. **Store condoms in a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight** (like a closet or a drawer). Avoid extreme temperatures (like a hot glove compartment) and places with lots of friction (like a wallet or pocket). If you want to keep a condom on you, put it in a loose pocket, wallet, or purse for no more than a few hours.

## **DOING IT RIGHT**

### **❖ PUTTING ON CONDOMS**

1. **Only use new condoms.** You already know this, but we'll say it again...don't reuse condoms!
2. **Check the expiration date.** Make sure the packaging has no punctures. Do a pillow test by squeezing the packet to be sure air stays inside of it.
3. **Open the package gently** to avoid damaging the condom. Avoid using teeth, scissors, or sharp nails.
4. **Check for defects.** Don't use condoms that are damaged, discolored, brittle, too gummy, or stick to themselves. Check the condom tip for signs of damage.
5. **Put a drop or two of lube inside the tip of the condom** to prevent rips and tears and to increase sensation. Many condoms are already pre-lubricated. If a lubricant is used, choose one that is **water-based** (eg. K-Y Jelly, Astroglide, or Aqualube Glycerin). Do not use oil-based lubricants (eg. petroleum jelly, mineral oil, or cold cream), which can break down latex.
6. If the penis is uncircumcised, **pull the foreskin back** before putting the condom on.
7. **Put the condom on after the penis is erect and before any contact is made between the penis and the partner's body.** This decreases exposure to bodily fluids, such as pre-ejaculate, semen, vaginal secretions and urine. Pre-ejaculate can carry enough sperm to cause pregnancy and enough germs to cause an STI. (So the pull-out method is definitely not the way to go!)
8. **Pinch the tip of the condom** to leave a half-inch space for semen to collect.
9. **While pinching the half-inch tip, place the condom against the penis and unroll it all the way to the base.** Smooth out any air bubbles as friction against the air bubbles can cause condom breaks.
10. **Add more lubricant to the outside of the condom** to decrease friction and risk of breakage.

### **❖ TAKING OFF CONDOMS**

1. **Withdraw the penis before losing an erection,** holding onto the base of the condom to make sure it does not slip off.
2. **Pull the condom gently off the penis, without spilling the semen.**
3. **Wrap the used condom in a tissue and throw it in the trash,** out of reach of children and pets. Don't flush condoms down the toilet because they can cause sewage problems.
4. **Wash your hands with soap and water. The penis should also be washed** with soap and water before further sexual activity.

### **❖ WHAT IF THE CONDOM BREAKS?**

1. If a condom break is felt during sex, **stop immediately and pull out.** Do not continue until a new condom is put on.
2. If semen leaks into the vagina during a woman's fertile period because of condom breakage or inappropriate removal, **emergency contraception (Plan B) can prevent pregnancy if used within 120 hours**—the sooner, the better! Plan B is available without a prescription at local pharmacies and is available at the Student Health Pharmacy for \$30.

## **OTHER BARRIER METHODS**

Less commonly used barrier methods include female condoms, finger cots, and dental dams. Like male condoms, they protect against STIs by acting as a barrier to bodily fluids.

### **❖ FINGER COTS**

- Finger cots are like latex condoms for the finger. They provide protection when fingering the vagina or anus. Non-latex versions are also available. Since they are more commonly used to cover wounds on the finger, finger cots can be found in the wound care section of drugstores.
- Finger cots should cover the entire finger. Like condoms, they should not be reused; this includes when switching from penetration of the vagina to the anus and vice versa.
- Latex surgical gloves may be a better alternative since they provide greater skin coverage, and therefore, better STI protection.

## ❖ FEMALE CONDOMS

- A female condom is a pouch that fits inside the vagina and covers the vulva (the outer female genitals). The FC2 Female Condom is the only one that's FDA approved and available in the US. It takes a little practice to insert correctly, but the female condom works pretty much like a male condom. Used perfectly, the female condom has a failure rate of 5%.
- Advantages to the female condom include the following:
  - More control for the female partner. If your partner refuses a male condom, protect yourself with a female condom. Because of its coverage, the female condom also provides STI protection for parts of the outer genitals, which the male condom cannot.
  - Stays in place even if your partner loses his erection.
  - Good for people with latex allergies. The FC2 Female Condom is made of nitrile (synthetic rubber).
  - Can be used with water- or oil-based lubricants.
- The FC2 Female Condom is available over-the-counter but is covered by most health insurances with no out-of-pocket expenses when prescribed by a physician. Without insurance, female condoms run about \$2-3 each. If you can't find them in your local drugstore or family planning clinic (like Planned Parenthood), you can purchase them online at [fc2.us.com](http://fc2.us.com).

## ❖ DENTAL DAMS

- Dental dams are small, thin latex squares that can be used for oral-vaginal or oral-anal sex. They are placed over the vulva or anus and act as a barrier between the mouth and the covered genital area. Non-latex (polyurethane) dental dams are also available.
- Adding a few drops of water-based lubricant between the dam and vagina/anus will increase sensation and keep the dam in place.
- Never reuse a dental dam or flip it over and use the other side.
- Don't have a dental dam handy? Just cut a condom in half lengthwise, or cut open a latex glove. For best results, use an unlubricated condom.
- Not a DIYer? Dental dams can be purchased at local drugstores or online.

## OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS TO CONDOM USE

- ❖ **"It ruins the mood."** In well-practiced hands, a condom can be removed from its package and placed on the penis correctly in less than 8 seconds. That certainly is not enough time to lose interest in anything!
- ❖ **"It doesn't feel as good."** It's true that using a condom during vaginal, anal, or oral sex can change sensation. To increase sensation, use a water-based lubricant inside and outside the condom. Decreased sensation can be a good thing for men experiencing premature ejaculation.
- ❖ **"I never seem to have one at the right time."** This is easily overcome by visiting the Well (get free condoms through their Condom Concierge program at <https://thewell.vcu.edu/programs/condom-concierge/>), University Student Health Services, any drugstore, or [condomfinder.org](http://condomfinder.org). Latex condoms at the Student Health Pharmacy cost only 6 for \$3.
- ❖ **"If you really love me, you wouldn't ask me to wear a condom."** Not giving into someone you love is worth the risk when the stakes are this high. A good response might be, "Do you really want to be loved by having someone risk his/her life for you? I'd much rather show my love by protecting both of us."
- ❖ **"You don't trust me when I've told you that I don't have any STIs."** The problem is that many people are not aware that they have an STI because the symptoms can be very mild. In some cases, there are no symptoms at all.
- ❖ **"I'm tired of hearing about diseases and condoms."** Denial is one of the most common roadblocks to safe sex. The "not me" attitude runs rampant. Unfortunately, many college students are contracting STIs. Some can be cured, and some cannot. Others, such as HIV/AIDS, can be deadly. Remind your partner that the most important sexual organ in the body is the BRAIN. Safer sex can be more fun!

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:** [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), [www.goaskalice.columbia.edu](http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu)