

U.S. Food and Drug Administration
Protecting and Promoting *Your* Health

Condoms and Sexually Transmitted Diseases

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It's important to use condoms (rubbers, prophylactics) to help reduce the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). These diseases include the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), chlamydia, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhea, hepatitis B, and syphilis. You can get them through having sex -- vaginal, anal, or oral.

The surest way to avoid these diseases is to not have sex altogether (abstinence). Another

way is to limit sex to one partner who also limits his or her sex in the same way (monogamy). Condoms are not 100% safe, but if used properly, will reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS. Protecting yourself against the AIDS virus is of special concern because this disease is fatal and has no cure.

Many people infected with HIV in the United States got the disease during sexual intercourse with an infected partner. Experts believe that many of these people could have avoided the disease by using condoms.

Condoms are used for both birth control and reducing the risk of disease. That's why some people think that other forms of birth control -- such as the IUD, diaphragm, cervical cap or pill -- will protect them against diseases, too. But that's not true. So if you use any other form of birth control, you still need a condom in addition to reduce the risk of getting sexually transmitted diseases.

A condom is especially important when an uninfected pregnant woman has sex, because it can also help protect her and her unborn child from a sexually transmitted disease.

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Facts about Sexually Transmitted Diseases

- Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) affect millions of men and women in the United States each year.
- Anyone can become infected through sexual intercourse with an infected person.
- Many of those infected are teenagers or young adults.
- Changing sexual partners adds to the risk of becoming infected.
- Sometimes, early in the infection, there may be no symptoms, or symptoms may be easily confused with other illnesses.

Sexually transmitted diseases can cause:

- Tubal pregnancies, sometimes fatal to the mother and always fatal to the unborn child
- Death or severe damage to a baby born to an infected woman
- Sterility (loss of ability to get pregnant)
- Cancer of the cervix in women
- Damage to other parts of the body, including the heart, kidneys, and brain
- Death of infected individuals

See a doctor if you have any of these symptoms of STDs:

- Discharge from the vagina, penis, and/or rectum
- Pain or burning during urination and/or intercourse
- Pain in the abdomen (women), testicles (men), and buttocks and legs (both)
- Blisters, open sores, warts, rash, and/or swelling in the genital area, sex organs, and/or mouth

- Flu-like symptoms, including fever, headache, aching muscles, and/or swollen glands

You can get more information about preventing sexually transmitted diseases by calling the National AIDS Hotline, the National Sexually Transmitted Diseases Hotline, or your state or local hotlines. (See [For more information](#) for free hotline numbers.)

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Who should use a condom?

A person who takes part in risky sexual behavior should always use a condom.

The highest risk comes from having intercourse -- vaginal, anal, or oral -- with a person who has a sexually transmitted disease. If you have sex with an infected person, you're taking a big chance. If you know your partner is infected, the best rule is to avoid intercourse (including oral sex). If you do decide to have sex with an infected partner, you should always be sure a condom is used from start to finish, every time.

And it's risky to have sex with someone who has shared needles with an infected person.

It's also risky to have sex with someone who had sex with an infected person in the past. If your partner had intercourse with a person infected with HIV (the AIDS virus), he or she could pass it on to you. That can happen even if the intercourse was a long time ago and even if your partner seems perfectly healthy.

With sexually transmitted diseases, you often can't tell whether your partner has been infected. If you're not sure about yourself or your partner, you should choose to not have sex at all. But if you do have sex, be sure to use a condom that covers the entire penis to reduce your risk of being infected. This includes oral sex where the penis is in contact with the mouth.

If you think you and your partner should be using condoms but your partner refuses, then you should say NO to sex with that person.

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Will a condom guarantee I won't get a sexually transmitted disease?

No. Consistent and correct use of the male latex condom reduces the risk of sexually transmitted disease (STD) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) transmission. However, condom use cannot provide absolute protection against any STD. The most reliable ways to avoid transmission of STDs are to abstain from sexual activity, or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner. However, many infected persons may be unaware of their infection because STDs often are asymptomatic and unrecognized.

In other words, sex with condoms isn't totally "safe sex," but it is "less risky" sex.

HIV infection is, by far, the most deadly STD, and considerably more scientific evidence exists regarding condom effectiveness for prevention of HIV infection than for other STDs. The body of research on the effectiveness of latex condoms in preventing sexual transmission of HIV is both comprehensive and conclusive. The ability of latex condoms to prevent transmission of HIV has been scientifically established in “real-life” studies of sexually active couples as well as in laboratory studies.

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How can I get the most protection from condoms?

- Choose the right kind of condoms to prevent disease. (See our **[condom shopping guide](#)**.)
- Store them properly.
- Remember to use a new condom every time you have sex.
- Use the condom the right way, from start to finish. (See our **[directions for correct use](#)**.)

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How does a condom protect against sexually transmitted diseases?

A condom acts as a barrier or wall to keep blood, or semen, or vaginal fluids from passing from one person to the other during intercourse.

These fluids can harbor germs such as HIV (the virus that causes AIDS). If no condom is used, the germs can pass from the infected partner to the uninfected partner.

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How do I choose the right kind of condoms to prevent disease?

Always read the label. Look for two things:

1. *The condoms should be made of latex (rubber), or polyurethane condoms for people sensitive or allergic to latex.* Tests have shown that latex and polyurethane condoms (including the female condom) can prevent the passage of the HIV, hepatitis and herpes viruses. But natural (lambskin) condoms may not do this.
2. *The package should say that the condoms are to prevent disease.* If the package doesn't say anything about preventing disease, the condoms may not provide the protection you want, even though they may be the most expensive ones you can buy.

Novelty condoms will not say anything about either disease prevention or pregnancy prevention on the package. They are intended only for sexual stimulation, not protection.

Condoms which do not cover the entire penis are not labeled for disease prevention and should not be used for this purpose. For proper protection, a condom must unroll to cover the entire penis. This is another good reason to read the label carefully.

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What does the FDA do to ensure condom quality?

The FDA works with condom manufacturers to help ensure that the latex and polyurethane condoms you buy are not damaged.

Manufacturers "spot check" their condoms using a "water-leak" test. FDA inspectors do a similar test on sample condoms they take from warehouses. The condoms are filled with water and checked for leaks. An average of 996 of 1000 condoms must pass this test.

(Don't try the water-leak test on condoms you plan to use, because this kind of testing weakens condoms.)

Government testing cannot guarantee that condoms will always prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. How well you are protected will also depend a great deal on which condoms you choose and how you store, handle and use them.

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Are condoms strong enough for anal intercourse?

Condoms may be more likely to break during anal intercourse than during other types of sex because of the greater amount of friction and other stresses involved.

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Should spermicides be used with condoms?

The active ingredient in all of the over-the-counter (OTC) vaginal contraceptive drug products (spermicides) available in the U.S. is nonoxynol 9 (N-9). N-9 vaginal contraceptive drug products are used alone to prevent pregnancy, or with barrier methods such as diaphragms or cervical caps. Some condoms include a spermicidal lubricant containing N-9.

Clinical studies have shown that N-9 spermicides do **not** prevent or reduce the risk of getting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, from an infected partner, or against getting other STDs. Thus, N-9 spermicides should **not** be used for HIV/STD prevention or protection. Clinical studies also show that use of N-9 spermicides can cause vaginal and rectal irritation which could increase the risk of getting HIV/AIDS from an infected partner.

FDA still considers N-9 safe as a contraceptive for women at low risk for HIV and other STDs. However, FDA now requires warning statements and other labeling information for all over the counter (OTC) vaginal contraceptive drug product (also known as spermicides) containing nonoxynol 9 (N9). These warning statements

advise consumers that vaginal contraceptives/spermicides containing N9 do not protect against infection from the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), or against getting other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The warnings and labeling information also advise consumers that use of vaginal contraceptives and spermicides containing N9 can irritate the vagina and rectum and may increase the risk of getting the AIDS virus (HIV) from an infected partner.

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Should I use a lubricant with a condom?

Some condoms are already lubricated with dry silicone, jellies, or creams. If you buy condoms not already lubricated, it's a good idea to apply some yourself. Lubricants may help prevent condoms from breaking during use and may prevent irritation, which might increase the chance of infection.

If you use a separate lubricant, be sure to use one that's water-based and made for this purpose. If you're not sure which to choose, ask your pharmacist.

Never use a lubricant that contains oils, fats, or greases such as petroleum-based jelly (like Vaseline brand), baby oil or lotion, hand or body lotions, cooking shortenings, or oily cosmetics like cold cream. They can seriously weaken latex, causing a condom to tear easily.

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Does it matter which styles of condoms I use?

It's most important to choose condoms that say "disease prevention" on the package. Other features are a matter of personal choice.

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What do the dates mean on the package?

Some packages show "DATE MFG." This tells you when the condoms were made. It is not an expiration date.

Other packages may show an expiration date. The condoms should not be purchased or used after that date.

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Are condoms from vending machines any good?

It depends. Vending machine condoms may be OK:

- If you know you are getting a latex or polyurethane condom,
- If they are labeled for disease prevention,
- If the condoms do not contain nonoxynol 9 (N9) spermicide.

- If the machine is not exposed to extreme temperature and direct sunlight.

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How should condoms be stored?

You should store condoms in a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight, perhaps in a drawer or closet. If you want to keep one with you, put it in a loose pocket, wallet, or purse for no more than a few hours at a time.

Extreme temperature -- especially heat -- can make latex brittle or gummy (like an old balloon). So don't keep these latex products in a hot place like a glove compartment

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How should condoms be handled?

Gently! When opening the packet, don't use your teeth, scissors or sharp nails. Make sure you can see what you're doing.

What defects should I look for?

If the condom material sticks to itself or is gummy, the condom is no good. Also check the condom tip for other damage that is obvious (brittleness, tears, and holes). Don't unroll the condom to check it because this could cause damage.

Never use a damaged condom

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How should I use a condom?

Follow these guidelines

- Use a new condom for every act of intercourse.
- If the penis is uncircumcised, pull the foreskin back before putting the condom on.
- Put the condom on after the penis is erect (hard) and before any contact is made between the penis and any part of the partner's body.
- If the condom does not have a reservoir tip, pinch the tip enough to leave a half-inch space for semen to collect.
- While pinching the half-inch tip, place the condom against the penis and unroll it all the way to the base. Put more lubricant on the outside.
- If you feel a condom break while you are having sex, stop immediately and pull out. Do not continue until you have put on a new condom.
- After ejaculation and before the penis gets soft, grip the rim of the condom and carefully withdraw from your partner.
- To remove the condom from the penis, pull it off gently, being careful semen doesn't spill out.

- Wrap the used condom in a tissue and throw it in the trash where others won't handle it. Because condoms may cause problems in sewers, don't flush them down the toilet. Afterwards, wash your hands with soap and water.
- Finally, beware of drugs and alcohol! They can affect your judgment, so you may forget to use a condom. They may even affect your ability to use a condom properly.

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Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, can be prevented!

Learn the facts so that you can protect yourself and others from getting infected. Condoms are not 100% safe, but if used properly, will significantly reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS. If you have unprotected sex now, you can contract sexually transmitted diseases. Later, if you decide to have children, you might pass the disease on to them.

If you would like more information about condoms and how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, talk with your doctor or call:

The National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention. It's open 24 hours a day. Trained operators will answer your questions and can send you more information. Or visit their web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/> (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/>)

- For AIDS information in English, 1-800-232-4636
In English, en Español, 24 Hours/Day
- TTY / Hearing Impaired Access, 1-888-232-6348

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Condom Shopping Guide

Use this handy shopping guide as a reminder of what to look for when buying condoms and lubricants.

Always be sure to choose:

Latex or polyurethane, including the female condom

Disease prevention claim on package label

Also consider:

With lubricant

Separate lubricant (Select only *water-based* lubricants made for this purpose.)

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For additional information, see the CDC's **[Male Latex and Sexually Transmitted Disease Fact Sheet \(http://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/brief.html\)](http://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/brief.html)** and **[Condoms and STDs: Fact Sheet for Public Health Personnel \(http://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/docs/Condoms_and_STDS.pdf\)](http://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/docs/Condoms_and_STDS.pdf)**

<u>More in HIV/AIDS (/ForPatients/Illness/HIVAIDS/default.htm)</u>	
<u>HIV/AIDS Prevention (/ForPatients/Illness/HIVAIDS/Prevention/default.htm)</u>	▼
<u>HIV/AIDS Treatment (/ForPatients/Illness/HIVAIDS/Treatment/default.htm)</u>	▼
<u>HIV/AIDS Safety Information (/ForPatients/Illness/HIVAIDS/Safety/default.htm)</u>	▼
<u>HIV/AIDS History of Approvals (/ForPatients/Illness/HIVAIDS/History/default.htm)</u>	