



Developing Health
& Independence

Safer Sex

Information and Advice

Safer Sex

If you are sexually active or are planning on having sex, it is important that you know how to make sure the experience is as safe as possible. The most obvious risks of unprotected sex are pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It is also important to consider any potential emotional consequences.

Drug and alcohol use can reduce your inhibitions and make you more likely to take risks. For example, you may be less concerned about the consequences of unprotected sex, or you may choose to have sex when you wouldn't have done so sober. If you use drugs/alcohol or are planning to, it is very important to be aware of the steps you can take to minimise any risks.

Reducing the risk of STIs

The term “Sexually Transmitted Infection” or “STI” is used to refer to a large number of different conditions, all of which can be transmitted from person to person through sexual contact. STIs can be caused by bacterial infections (e.g., Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea, Syphilis) or viruses (e.g., Genital Herpes, Human Papilloma Virus, Human Immunodeficiency Virus).

Many STIs are initially symptomless, so it is important to get checked out if you feel you may have been in a risky situation. The diagnosis and treatment will depend on the type of infection, but the majority of STIs can be easily detected with a simple blood test or swab. Many STIs can be cured completely using antibiotic medication. Others, such as Genital Herpes and HIV, do not currently have a cure but symptoms can be managed with medication.

Barrier methods

The most effective way of reducing the risk of contracting or passing on an STI is by using “barrier methods”. The most widely used barrier method is the male condom. Other options are female condoms and dental dams. A dental dam is a sheet of latex (or similar material) used during oral sex to help stop STIs being spread.

Condoms have been shown to greatly reduce the risk of passing on most STIs. Latex condoms are the most effective but for those who are sensitive to latex, condoms made of polyurethane also help to reduce the risk.

In the UK, condoms are available free of charge from family planning clinic, some genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics, and some GP surgeries. They can also be bought from most supermarkets and pharmacies. If you are sexually active or are considering having sex, it is worth always having a condom with you "just in case". This is particularly important if you are going to be using drugs or alcohol, as you may be more likely to take a risk if you are unprepared.

Tips for condom use

- Ideally, you should use a condom every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex. However, using a condom as often as possible is still safer than not using one at all.
- Practise using a condom so you can reliably put one on even if it is dark or you are in a hurry.
- You can pass on an STI even if you don't ejaculate so use a condom for all penetrative sex.
- Do not unroll the condom before putting it on.
- Remove all air from the condom before rolling it on.
- Hold the condom on after having sex as you withdraw your penis.

Getting tested

It is recommended that you consider having tests for STIs before having sex with somebody new, and asking them to get tested too. If you are at higher risk of catching an STI, it is sensible to have regular tests.

You might be at higher risk of an STI if you:

- ❖ Have had a lot of different sexual partners.
- ❖ Are a man who has sex with men.
- ❖ Have sex as part of your job.
- ❖ Have a past history of an STI.
- ❖ Have a partner who has had STIs in the past or currently has an STI.
- ❖ Use intravenous drugs and share needles.
- ❖ Come from, or have visited, a country with a high rate of HIV or other STIs.

You can be tested by your GP or at a GUM clinic. You do not need a referral from your GP to attend a GUM clinic. Home tests for chlamydia can also be found at some pharmacies and sent away by post.

Reducing the risk of pregnancy

"Safer sex" usually refers to protecting yourself against STIs. However, if you do not wish to become pregnant, this is something else to consider before having sex. In addition to the barrier methods we have already discussed, there are a number of other ways of avoiding becoming pregnant when you have sex. All these methods have their own pros and cons, and your GP/nurse/GUM clinic advisor will be able to help you weigh these up.

Women can access a range of contraceptive pills through their GP. These generally need to be taken daily with a short break each month. Contraceptive pills can have side-effects (including nausea, head-aches, changes in mood and weight) – these will vary depending on what specific medication is used, as each brand contains different levels of hormones.

There are also forms of contraceptive which do not need to be taken every day. These include injections, implants (a small matchstick-sized device which is inserted under the skin and releases hormones), the vaginal ring (which releases hormones and is replaced once a month), and intrauterine contraceptive methods (which are inserted into the uterus by a doctor or nurse and work by releasing either copper or the hormone progesterone). For people who are certain they do not wish to have children, there are permanent methods of sterilisation available for both women and men.

Most contraceptive methods do not protect you from STIs, so unless both you and your partner have been recently tested, it is advisable to wear a condom as well.

Contraception for young people

Even though it is illegal for a person under the age of 16 to have sex, doctors and other health professionals can help keep them safe. This means that a doctor can provide advice on safer sex if they believe it is in your best interests to do so. They are under no obligation to tell your parents just because you are under 16. However, if a health professional feels you have been forced or coerced into having sex, they would have to take this concern further.

Staying safe emotionally

Because sex is such a close experience, it will usually have an emotional impact. Many people connect sex with love – if you are thinking of sex as a more casual experience, check your partner feels the same before going any further. You will both be safer if you can talk about where you are emotionally beforehand. In this way you can make sure you are both feeling the same way and one person will not get hurt. It may also be wise to talk about previous sexual experiences where possible. You may wish your partner to have tests for STIs before starting a sexual relationship, especially if they have had many past sexual partners, or an STI in the past.

Useful resources

NHS safer sex guidelines:

<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/sexualhealthtopics/pages/sexual-health-hub.aspx>

Advice for accessing sexual health advice in South Gloucestershire:

<http://www.southglos.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/staying-healthy/sexual-health/sexual-health-services/sexual-health-information-and-services-for-adults/>

Unity Sexual Health (South Gloucestershire sexual health clinic):

<https://www.unitysexualhealth.co.uk/>