

# Talking with Your Partner about Condoms <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Table of Contents

- [Condoms and HIV](#)
- [Benefits of Using Condoms](#)
- [Know What Is Out There and How to Use It](#)
- [Talking with Your Partner about Condoms](#)
- [Taking Care of Yourself](#)

Using male or female condoms is an important part of having [safer sex](#) [2]. Using them correctly and consistently ? every time you have sex ? can reduce the spread of HIV and other [sexually transmitted diseases](#) [3] (STDs), and prevent unwanted pregnancies. Choosing to use a condom shows that you care about the health of yourself and your sexual partner(s).

## Condoms and HIV

Research has shown that using latex or polyurethane (plastic) condoms is one of the most effective ways of preventing the spread of HIV and other STDs. Some studies have shown that among couples in which one person is HIV+ and the other HIV-negative, condoms ? if used all the time ? can be up to 98 percent protective in helping the HIV-negative partner stay negative.

However, condoms are not only for the prevention of new HIV infections. For people living with HIV (HIV+), using condoms is important because it can prevent infection with other STDs that can weaken the immune system. If both people are HIV+, safer sex can also reduce the chances of getting infected with another strain of HIV that is [resistant](#) [4] to the HIV drugs you are taking.

## Benefits of Using Condoms

Sex with condoms can be fun, exciting, and very pleasurable. It can decrease your worry about getting or spreading STDs and [getting pregnant](#) [5], which can in turn make your sex more relaxed and satisfying. It is also a great chance to add variety to your sex life and to build trust and intimacy with your partner by talking about each other's desires.

Whether you are in love with your sexual partner or never intend to see that person again, using a condom is an important part of taking care of yourself and your health. Since you cannot tell if someone has an STD by his or her physical appearance, and since it is possible for someone to have an STD without even knowing it, it is important to protect yourself every time.

## Know What Is Out There and How to Use It

There are two main types of condoms: male condoms and female condoms. Most male condoms are made of latex; some are made of polyurethane (a type of plastic) or lambskin. Lambskin condoms can prevent pregnancy; however, they do NOT prevent the spread of HIV or other viral STDs like herpes, [hepatitis B](#) [6], and [hepatitis C](#) [7]. Only latex and plastic condoms prevent the spread of HIV and viral STDs.

Male condoms come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, textures, and even tastes. They are generally inexpensive (\$.50 to \$1.00 each) and can be found at pharmacies, grocery stores, and sex stores. Sometimes they are available for free at certain health clinics and AIDS service organizations. They are also quite small and easy to carry so that you can always be prepared to protect yourself. It is important to keep condoms away from heat and check the expiration date. Condoms that have been exposed to heat and are too old are more likely to break.

Female condoms are made of polyurethane or nitrile (synthetic rubber) and can be put inside the vagina before you have sex. The female condom looks like a pouch, with a flexible ring at each end. The ring at the closed end goes inside the vagina and covers the cervix (opening to the womb). The other ring sits outside the vaginal opening and partially covers the labia (lips). They usually cost a bit more than male condoms and are available at pharmacies, grocery stores, and sex stores. They are also available for free at certain health clinics and AIDS service organizations.

Female condoms can be an excellent choice for several reasons: you can insert them up to several hours before having sex, you are in control of putting it in and taking it out, and you can use one if your partner does not use a male condom (e.g., he refuses, he complains about sensation, or has trouble staying hard with a male condom).

To make sex even safer, consider using lubricant ('lube'). Lube can prevent the condom from breaking and also helps prevent small cuts or tears in the vagina or the anus and on the penis during penetration. Lube is good whether or not the condom comes pre-lubricated; sometimes the lubrication on the condoms is not enough.

When using latex condoms, use only water- or silicone-based lube. Do not use oil-based lubes like Vaseline, Crisco, shea butter, or baby oil with latex condoms because they weaken the condom and make it more likely to break. Silicone-based lube will last longer than water-based lube. Lube can also make the condom feel better. There are several types and brands of lubes, with a variety of different feels and tastes. Some also contain substances that 'warm' or enhance sensation.

## **Talking with Your Partner about Condoms**

### **Preparing to talk about condoms**

Even if you have access to condoms and know how to use them, getting your partner to actually put one on can be tricky! Talking about using condoms can be difficult or awkward, especially in the heat of the moment. It can be helpful to think about your personal views and cultural attitudes about sex, condoms, and relationships before trying to talk about condoms with a partner. Once you are clear on what is important to you and what you are willing or not willing to do with a partner sexually, it will be easier to say those things to another person.

Sometimes discussions about sex and condoms are difficult because women and girls:

- May not feel empowered in their relations with men: if you depend on a male partner for food, shelter, money, safety, or feeling valued as a person, you may not feel you have the power to protect your health or ask that your sexual desires be recognized
- Are often taught that good girls do not say 'no'

- Are often taught that it is not 'their place' to 'speak up' and protect themselves
- Feel uncomfortable talking about sex ? sometimes this is from lack of information, and sometimes this is simply because it can be awkward talking about something so personal or intimate
- May fear rejection ? if you feel your partner may leave you or think poorly of you if you talk about using condoms
- May fear a partner's violent reaction ? if you feel threatened, please read The Well Project's article, [Violence Against Women and HIV](#) [8]

In some cultures, there are more difficulties in negotiating condom use. In some societies, "good" women are those who do not talk about sex, who are passive during sex, and who do not question the faithfulness of their partners. It can also be difficult to discuss barrier methods for safer sex when a woman is expected to bear children or her value in the community is based on her ability to become [pregnant](#) [9].

It may be equally difficult for an HIV+ woman to talk about safer sex if she wants to have children herself. For more information on living with HIV and having children, see The Well Project's [Getting Pregnant and HIV](#) [5].

Regardless of what country or culture you live in, it is important to remember that you and your health deserve to be respected and protected. Whether you think of yourself as a wife, businesswoman, mother, provider, or friend, your health is a valuable asset ? to you, your family, and your community.

It can also be helpful to identify things that might make you feel pressured to go against your values or better judgment ? and to prepare responses in advance. You may want to try talking through or rehearsing some of these situations with a friend. For some examples, go to:

- [Talking to a Partner](#) [10] (ASHA)
- [Condom negotiation](#) [11] (IPPF)

## **Some tips about how to talk with your partner**

Now that you are prepared with information about yourself and different kinds of condoms, you are ready to have an honest conversation. Talking about your needs can help strengthen a relationship, both in and out of the bedroom.

Plan to have the talk when you are not getting ready to have sex. When it comes time to have the conversation, let your partner know that you want to talk about condoms because you care about him and you care about yourself. Be honest about what you are willing to do with a condom and what you are not willing to do without one. Ask your partner how he would feel about different situations and think creatively about ways in which you could both get your needs met.

If your partner says he does not want to put on a male condom, you still have options:

- Offer to put a condom on him or be ready with a female condom
- Tell him you will not have sex without a condom
- Try a less risky way of being intimate ? such as erotic massage or mutual masturbation

# Taking Care of Yourself

Safer sex is an ongoing practice that ideally involves condom use every time you have sex, whether you are HIV+ or HIV-negative. Here are some ideas on how you can make condom use an easier, smoother part of sex:

- Think of how you would ask someone to use a condom. Practice some of the lines on your own or with friends, so you will be ready to say them when the time comes.
- Carry condoms with you, so you will be ready for any unexpected sexual situation
- Practice! Before being sexual with a partner, practice putting on and taking off a male condom. Try rolling one on and off a banana, dildo, or vibrator. Also try inserting and removing a female condom to see how it feels and how it fits.

It can be difficult to talk about things like safer sex, especially when you are just getting to know someone. You may be worried that you will lose your partner or potential partner. However, it is important to keep the health and safety of yourself and your partner as top priorities. Even if you have trouble at first asking for what you need, do not give up. Your health and well-being are worthy of respect and protection, at any time and all the time.

## Tags:

- [safe sex](#) [12]
- [HIV](#) [13]
- [HIV and women](#) [14]
- [condoms](#) [15]
- [latex](#) [16]
- [dental dams](#) [17]
- [negotiating condom use](#) [18]
- [negotiating for condom use](#) [19]
- [male condom](#) [20]
- [female condom](#) [21]
- [safe sex HIV](#) [22]
- [HIV+ sex](#) [23]
- [condoms HIV](#) [24]
- [condom AIDS](#) [25]
- [how to use a condom](#) [26]
- [how to use a female condom](#) [27]

## Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to negotiating for condom use.

[How to put on a male condom \(CPS\)](#) [28]

[How to put on a female condom](#) [29]

[Condom Use, Types, & Sizes \(AVERT\)](#) [30]

[Male Condoms: Condom Sense \(video by ASHA\)](#) [31]

[Talking with Your Partner about Condoms \(Center for Young Women's Health\)](#) [32]

[Condom Negotiation \(IPPF\)](#) [11]

Condoms (Planned Parenthood) [33]

Making Informed Decisions: The Facts about Condoms (ASHA) [34]

- [Sign Up / Login](#)
- [My Account](#)
- [HIV Information](#)
- [A Girl Like Me](#)
- [Partners](#)
- [Who We Are](#)
- [Terms](#)
- [Privacy](#)
- [Contact](#)



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**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/talking-your-partner-about-condoms>
- [2] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/safer-sex>
- [3] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/sexually-transmitted-diseases-stds>
- [4] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/resistance>
- [5] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/getting-pregnant-and-hiv>
- [6] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/hepatitis-b>
- [7] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/hepatitis-c-hcv>
- [8] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/violence-against-women-and-hiv>
- [9] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/pregnancy-and-hiv>
- [10] <http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/sexual-health/all-about-condoms/talking-to-a-partner-about-condoms/>
- [11] <http://ippf.org/news/blogs/condom-negotiation>
- [12] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/safe-sex>
- [13] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/hiv-0>
- [14] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/hiv-and-women>
- [15] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/condoms>
- [16] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/latex>
- [17] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/dental-dams>
- [18] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/negotiating-condom-use>
- [19] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/negotiating-condom-use-0>
- [20] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/male-condom>
- [21] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/female-condom>
- [22] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/safe-sex-hiv>
- [23] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/hiv-sex-0>
- [24] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/condoms-hiv>
- [25] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/condom-aids>
- [26] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/how-use-condom>
- [27] <http://www.thewellproject.org/tags/how-use-female-condom>
- [28] <http://www.positive.org/JustSayYes/safesex.html>

[29] <http://www.ripnroll.com/femalecondoms.htm>

[30] <http://www.avert.org/condom-use-types-sizes.htm>

[31] <http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/sexual-health/all-about-condoms/male-condoms/>

[32] <http://youngwomenshealth.org/2013/08/22/talking-about-condoms/>

[33] <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/birth-control/condom-10187.htm>

[34] [http://www.factsaboutcondoms.com/pdf/Trojan\\_Condomology\\_v020813.pdf](http://www.factsaboutcondoms.com/pdf/Trojan_Condomology_v020813.pdf)