Safer Sex

Last updated: January 12, 2023

Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

#thewellproject

www.thewellproject.org
Safer sex (n.): Sex that reduces the chances of spreading or getting sexually transmitted diseases or infections (STDs or STIs)

- Involves certain actions (e.g., using a condom) that prevent person-to-person sharing of bodily fluids that are able to spread STIs
- Choosing to have safer sex shows that you care about the pleasure and health of you and your sexual partner(s)
Safer sex can:

• Be fun, exciting, very pleasurable
  – Can decrease your worry about getting or spreading STIs and thus make sex more relaxed and satisfying
  – May add variety to your sex life
  – Chance to build trust, intimacy with your partner by talking about each other’s desires

• Prevent infection with other STIs, which can weaken immune system in people living with HIV

• Reduce possibility of acquiring another strain of HIV, if all partners are living with HIV

www.thewellproject.org
Practicing safer sex involves knowing:

• What sexual activities are risky for each person
• How you can *make that activity less risky*
• What bodily fluids can spread STIs:
  – Blood (including menstrual blood)
  – Vaginal secretions
  – Semen (cum and pre-cum)
  – Anal fluids
Practicing Safer Sex

- Using barriers can help reduce risk of spreading or getting STIs
  - Keeps a partner’s fluids from getting into another’s body
  - Barriers include:
    - Condoms (male and internal, or female)
    - Dental dams (thin squares of latex)
    - Latex or nitrile gloves
- Today, there are more HIV protection options for people who don’t want to use barriers, or whose partners won’t use barriers
Treatment as prevention (TasP): the **use of HIV treatment** to lower risk of HIV transmission

- For people living with HIV:
  - Taking HIV drugs can reduce their viral load
  - An undetectable viral load means they **cannot transmit HIV through sex**

- For people who are HIV-negative:
  - Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP): Taking HIV drugs before being exposed to HIV to prevent yourself from acquiring it
    - **Women can use it to prevent acquiring HIV without their partners' knowledge or cooperation**
  - Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP): Taking HIV drugs for about a month, starting within 3 days of possible exposure to prevent HIV acquisition
Male Condoms

- Mostly made of latex; some made of polyisoprene (type of plastic) or lambskin
  - Only latex and plastic condoms prevent HIV
  - Lambskin condoms **DO NOT prevent HIV**; DO prevent pregnancy
- Variety of shapes, sizes, colors, textures, tastes
- Inexpensive at pharmacies, grocery stores, sex stores
  - Free at certain health clinics, AIDS-service organizations
- Small, easy to carry with you
  - You can **always be prepared to protect yourself!**

www.thewellproject.org
Internal (Female) Condoms

- Made of latex or polyurethane
- Can be put inside vagina or anus before beginning sexual activity
- Usually cost a bit more than male condoms
- Often available at pharmacies, grocery stores, sex stores
- Available for free at certain health clinics and AIDS service organizations
Lubricant (Lube)

• Makes penetrative sex (vaginal-penile, anal-penile, fisting) even safer
  – Can prevent condom from breaking
  – Helps prevent small cuts or tears in vagina, anus, rectum, and/or on penis during penetration

• Makes condoms feel better
  – Some contain substances that “warm” or enhance sensation

• Good for un-lubricated and already-lubricated condoms
  – Sometimes lubrication on condoms is not enough

• Several types, brands; variety of different feels, tastes

www.thewellproject.org
Cautions with Condoms and Lube

• **When using latex barriers:**
  – Use only water- or silicone-based lube
    • Silicone-based lube will last longer than water-based lube
  – **No oil-based lubes** (Vaseline, Crisco, shea butter, coconut or baby oil)
    • They can weaken latex condoms, make them more likely to break

• Don’t use condoms with spermicide Nonoxynol-9 (N-9)
  – Shorter shelf life
  – No better at pregnancy prevention than other lubricated condoms
  – May cause irritation of vagina/rectum and increase HIV risk

www.thewellproject.org
Heterosexual intercourse (penis goes into vagina)
- High-risk activity when barriers or TasP/PrEP/PEP not used
- Most common way HIV is spread worldwide
- Transmission much more likely from man to woman than reverse

Effective ways to make vaginal-penile sex safer:
- Use a condom
- Consider using lube
- Consider PrEP

If not using a condom, avoid getting semen in vagina by having man pull out before ejaculating, however:
- HIV can be in pre-cum (fluid from penis before ejaculation)
- Not a guarantee that you will not acquire HIV or other STIs
Anal-Penile Sex

- Penis enters **anus** (butt-hole)
  - High-risk activity when barriers or TasP/PrEP/PEP not used
  - Risk for receptive partner higher than for insertive partner
  - Still risky for insertive partner
- Making anal-penile sex safer:
  - Use a condom (male for insertive partner, or female for receptive partner) and lube
  - Consider PrEP
- If not using a condom, avoid getting semen in anus by having partner pull out before ejaculating
Oral Sex

• Contact between mouth and genitals
• Includes giving or receiving licking, sucking, biting of vulva (vagina, clitoris, and labia, or "lips"), penis, or anus
• Number of studies have demonstrated low but definite level of risk associated with both giving and receiving oral-penile sex
• To make oral sex safer:
  – Use a latex condom without lube on it
  – If you perform oral-penile sex without a condom
    • Finish up with your hand, or
    • Spit semen out, rinse with mouthwash, rather than swallowing

www.thewellproject.org
Oral-Vaginal Sex

- Rare but documented cases of HIV being spread from female-to-male and female-to-female during oral-vaginal sex
- To make oral-vaginal sex safer:
  - Use a **dental dam** (latex square) or a condom that has been cut open
  - Put some water- or silicone-based lube on one side of dental dam or cut-open condom
  - Stretch dam or condom over vulva with lubed side facing away from mouth; makes thin barrier between mouth and vulva
  - Some people use plastic food wrap
    - May prevent transmission of herpes infections
    - **No proof it can prevent transmission of HIV**

www.thewellproject.org
Oral-Anal Sex

- Oral-anal sex has been shown to spread hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C, as well as other infections
- To make oral-anal sex safer:
  - Use a dental dam or a condom that has been cut open
  - Put water- or silicone-based lube on one side of dental dam/condom
  - Stretch dam or condom over anus with lubed side facing away from mouth; makes thin barrier between mouth and anus
  - Consider PrEP
  - If you do not use a barrier during oral sex, avoid getting pre-cum, semen, menstrual blood, or vaginal fluids in your mouth
    - Avoid oral sex on a woman who is menstruating to prevent contact with blood
    - Bleeding gums, ulcers, or gum disease can make oral sex much riskier
    - Do not floss or brush your teeth just before oral sex; use a breath mint instead

www.thewellproject.org
Sex with Sex Toys

• STIs can be transmitted by using sex toys (vibrators, etc.)
  – Sex toys need to be kept clean, *whether used alone or with partners*
  – If not cleaned after each use, can grow bacteria, cause infection
    • Sex toys made of different materials must be cleaned in different ways
    • Read package insert instructions on how to clean your toy properly

• To make sex toy play safer:
  – Use toys with fresh latex condoms whenever toy is used by a different person, or in a different location (moves from vagina to anus or vice-versa)
  – Lube with sex toys enhances pleasure, reduces damage to tissues of vagina, mouth, anus, rectum
  – Do not use silicone-based lube with silicone sex toys; will destroy toy

• Sex toys only used by one person reduce chance of passing STIs
Fisting, Handballing, or Fingering

- Paper cuts and other openings in the skin can make your hands vulnerable to infection
- Wearing latex or nitrile gloves keeps you protected during hand-vagina, hand-penis, or hand-anus sex
- Adding water- or silicone-based lube to the outside of the gloves can increase your partner’s pleasure

www.thewellproject.org
No-Risk Safer Sex Activities

These activities do not spread STIs because there is *no physical contact with another’s bodily fluids*:

- Masturbation: touching your own genitals
- Phone sex, cybersex
- Talking dirty, sharing sexual fantasies
- Intimacy without sex: hugging, touching, massage
Other Safer Sex Tips

• Limit time and frequency of insertive sex
  – Repeated or rough vaginal, anal, and oral sex play can cause damage to linings of these areas
• Try non-insertive sex – mutual masturbation (touching each other’s genitals)
• Get medical attention for health problems in genital area
• Have a clear head
  – Under influence of drugs or alcohol, more likely to have unsafe sex
• Plan ahead: Get condoms, dental dams, gloves, lube, etc., before sexual situation
"We slipped once and forgot to use a condom, so it is too late now"

- **New idea: It is never too late**
  - Yes, even one time can be dangerous, but it is not as dangerous as many more times!
  - If you slipped once, it is time to get back on the wagon
  - Post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP, may also be an option

"Safer sex is such a drag. It is no fun"

- **New idea: Here is a great chance to spice up your sex life**
  - Why not take one of the workshops offered on "Eroticizing Safer Sex?"
  - How about getting a book or DVD about hot safer sex?
"Even though I'm taking HIV drugs and my viral load is undetectable, I am still worried that my partner will get HIV from me"

- **New idea: Undetectable equals Untransmittable!**
  - Feel free to let go of the decades of fear-based messages about HIV risk
  - While HIV drugs do not prevent other STIs or pregnancy, you and your partner(s) can rest easy and enjoy each other knowing that HIV transmission is not an issue
"I cannot feel anything through condoms!"

- **New idea: Time to change brands!**
  - Free or drug-store condoms may not be the best
  - Try sex supply catalogs or "adult love" stores

"Condoms are the method I want to use, but my partner absolutely refuses to use one."

- **New idea: How comfortable are you with someone who is willing to put your health and life at risk?**
  - Serious issue; probably not the only one in your relationship; consider individual/couples counseling
  - Consider PrEP
  - Use internal condom or offer to use your mouth to put on male condom

www.thewellproject.org
"I’m afraid that my partner will hurt me if I suggest that he use a condom."

• New idea: How comfortable are you being with someone who may hurt you?
  – Serious issue; probably not the only one in your relationship
  – National Domestic Violence hotline in the US at 800-799-SAFE [1-800-799-7233; or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)].

“I cannot suggest to my partner that we get an HIV test. He or she would take it as an insult.”

• New idea: How about presenting it as an act of love?
  – I don’t want to put you at risk, let’s get tested together
  – Taking PrEP also an option if you are HIV-negative
To learn more, and for links to articles featuring more details, please read the full fact sheet:

– **Safer Sex**

For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:

– [www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)
– [www.facebook.com/thewellproject](http://www.facebook.com/thewellproject)
– [www.twitter.com/thewellproject](http://www.twitter.com/thewellproject)