

Negotiating safe sex

Whether you are a young person thinking about having sex for the first time, or an older person entering a new relationship, negotiating safe sex can be difficult.

Safe sex is about being responsible for your own health. This means taking precautions during sexual activity and using condoms and dams to prevent the exchange of blood, semen and vaginal fluids (a dam is a thin latex square held over the vaginal or anal area during oral sex). Condoms and dams help reduce the risk of getting or passing on sexually transmissible infections (STIs) or HIV, and condoms also protect against pregnancy.

Condoms

Many people feel uncomfortable about condoms, and are unsure how to use them. The more comfortable you and your partner feel about condoms, the more likely you are to have safe sex. The following tips will help you to feel more comfortable:

- Find a place you feel comfortable purchasing condoms from. They are available from a range of places, including pharmacies, supermarkets and service stations. Investigate different colours and flavours – this can be fun!
- Learn how to put on and take off a condom before using one for the first time (if you are male, you can practise on yourself. If you are female, use a banana or carrot). Instructions can be found on the pack. A word of advice for women - don't assume that a man will feel confident using condoms. Learn how to use them yourself, so you can help.
- Putting lube onto the head of the penis can make sex more pleasurable for men (and less like they are wearing a condom).

Always have condoms handy if you think there is a possibility that you will be having sex. Don't assume that safe sex is a man's responsibility - women can carry condoms too.

Talk about it

Starting a conversation with a partner (or potential partner) about safe sex isn't easy, but it's a good idea to talk about condoms early on in any relationship. Lots of people plan on having safe sex, particularly with a new partner, but find it hard to bring up the topic of condoms in the heat of the moment.

When you do bring up the topic, it's likely you'll find that the other person has been wanting to talk about it also and feels just as awkward as you do!

The way you start the conversation will depend on the person and how well you know them. If you don't want to be direct you may say something like 'What do you think about condoms?', or mention a magazine article you read on safe sex. Introduce the topic at a low-key moment such as while on a walk, during dinner, or over the phone.

Communicate your feelings about safe sex in a clear and positive manner, to ensure there are no misunderstandings. It's often difficult to be assertive when negotiating safe sex, and you may worry about your partner's reaction. A lot of cultures don't speak openly about sex, and this can make it even harder to communicate. It is important to remember that your health is worth whatever feelings of awkwardness a conversation about safe sex might bring up, so persevere, even if you are finding it difficult.

Hopefully your partner will agree with you about the importance of safe sex. If they don't, try talking to them about the benefits of using condoms (protection against STIs and pregnancy), and remind them that safe sex doesn't mean it has to be less pleasurable. If they have a

negative attitude about condoms and safe sex, think about whether they are someone you still want to have sex with.

Down to business

Once you have talked with your partner and come to an agreement about condom use, it's important to stick to it when it comes to having sex - sometimes people try and 'back-down' on agreements once they get to the bedroom. It may help to think of some statements that you feel comfortable using to reinforce your feelings should this happen, such as:

- I want to have safe sex to protect both of us
- Let's have a good, safe time
- I want to enjoy sex without worrying about getting pregnant
- To make sure I don't get an infection, I always use condoms

Remember to always have some condoms handy - if none are available at the time of a sexual encounter, you may be tempted to have intercourse without one. Be aware that alcohol and drugs can have an impact on your ability to make safe decisions.

Incorporating condoms into foreplay is a good way to get someone to wear one. Make the act of putting on the condom a fun experience – offering to put it on for someone will often make them change their mind about not wanting to use one!

Afterwards, let your partner know that you appreciated their positive approach to safe sex, and encourage future good behaviour.

Still having trouble?

Don't have sex with a partner who refuses to wear a condom – having unprotected sex even once still puts you at risk of contracting an STI. Simply say 'I never have sex without one' and stand by your words.

Condoms come in a range of sizes, so don't listen to a man whose excuse is 'condoms are too tight' or 'they don't fit right'. If a partner feels uncomfortable buying condoms, offer to do it for them.

Remember that using condoms and dams doesn't have to be boring – you just need to be a bit more creative when it comes to introducing them into the bedroom!

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).



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