

Understanding STIs



When it comes to sex, nothing is risk-free. Any sexual contact with the penis, vagina, anus, or mouth can spread a sexually transmitted infection (STI). These include [chlamydia](#), gonorrhea, [herpes](#), HIV, and genital warts. STIs are also known as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The only sure way to prevent STIs is not having sex (abstinence). But there are ways to make sex safer. Use a latex condom each time you have sex. And choose your partner wisely.

Use condoms for safer sex

If you have sex, latex condoms provide the best protection against STIs. Latex condoms stop the exchange of body fluids that carry certain STIs. They also limit contact with affected skin. Be aware that a condom doesn't cover all skin. So affected [skin](#) that isn't covered can still transfer disease. But you're safer with a condom than without one. Use a condom even if you use other birth control. Birth control methods such as the pill or IUD help prevent pregnancy, but they don't protect against STIs.

Choose the right condom

Condoms made of latex prevent disease best. If you're allergic to latex, use polyurethane condoms instead. Male condoms fit over the penis. Female condoms line the vagina. Before buying a condom, read the label to be sure it prevents disease. Some novelty condoms don't.

The right lubricant helps

Buy lubricated condoms or use lubricant. This provides greater comfort and reduces the risk for condom breakage. Use only water-based lubricants. Don't use oil, lotion, or petroleum jelly. They can weaken the condom, causing breakage. Also, you may want to choose lubricants without

nonoxynol-9. This spermicide may cause irritation. It can raise the risk for certain STIs.

Use condoms correctly

For condoms to work, they must be used the right way. Keep these tips in mind:

- Use a new latex condom each time you have sex. Slip the condom on the penis before any contact is made.
- When ready to withdraw, hold the rim of the condom as the penis pulls out. This prevents the condom from slipping off.
- Check the expiration date before using a condom.
- Don't store condoms in places that can get hot, such as [a car](#) or a wallet that is carried in a back pocket.

Get to know your partner

Safer sex is a process. It involves getting to know your partner and making informed choices. Ask each other how many partners you have had in the past, and how many you have now. Find out if either of you has HIV or any other STI. If you decide to have sex, use a condom each time. Don't stop using condoms unless you're sure neither of you has other partners and you've both been tested to confirm you don't have HIV or other STIs. Then stay free of disease by having sex only with each other (monogamy).

Keep your cool

Don't let alcohol or drugs cloud your judgment. They could lead you to have sex with someone you wouldn't have chosen if you were sober. Or you might forget to use a condom. If you do plan to have sex, keep a latex condom with you. Don't wait until you're in the heat of passion to try to find one.

Consider abstinence

The only way to be sure you won't get an STI is to abstain from sex. Abstinence is a choice that many people make at some point in their life. Maybe you want to wait until you are sure you're ready before you have sex. Maybe you'd like a break from the responsibilities of sex for a while. Or maybe you just want to know your partner better before taking the next step. Abstinence is a choice you can make now to protect your future.

medical care. Always follow your [healthcare](#) professional's instructions.

