



WHITMAN-WALKER HEALTH



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CAMPAIGN  
FOUNDATION

SAFER SEX

# Why Have Safer Sex?

Maintaining a healthy, active and fun sex life is important to many people and can have many positive benefits for your overall health and wellness. But it's hard to enjoy sex when you're stressed out, particularly if you're concerned about the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). While there will always be some level of risk involved with having sex, this guide is designed to help you minimize those risks and ease your anxiety by providing practical information about safer sex.

## Specifically, this guide will:

- ▶ Provide a brief overview of the importance of having safer sex
- ▶ Outline the risks associated with particular types of sex, and
- ▶ Offer practical suggestions on how to protect yourself and your partner(s) from the spread of HIV and other STIs.

## Let's Talk About Sex!

The first step you can take toward having safer, more enjoyable sex is to talk about it. Many of us are told from an early age that sex isn't something you discuss. However, people who make a point of regularly speaking with their partner(s) about sex often find it becomes much easier to have these discussions. Talking to your partner(s) about the types of sex you like to have—and the steps you can take to protect yourself—is an opportunity to build trust and alleviate concerns.

Talking to your partner(s) about sex also gives you the chance to establish consent, which is the important, mutual agreement between two or more people to engage in sexual activity. Sex can be a particularly vulnerable experience for some people. Asking your partner(s) for consent is imperative and will go a long way toward helping everyone feel safe and sexy.

# Types of Sex

Now that you've learned about the importance of having safer sex, it's time to explore some different types of sex, the risks associated with each, and the variety of ways you can protect yourself. By following these easy tips, you can lead a healthy and active sex life while also reducing your risk of getting or transmitting HIV and other STIs.

## Sex with Fingers & Hands

Fingers and hands are often used during sex to stimulate certain areas of a partner's body, including the penis, vagina or anus (i.e., “fingering,” “fisting,” “giving a handjob”).

### Safer Sex Tips:

- ▶ Trim and file your nails before engaging in sexual activity. Also, take off any jewelry that may get in the way.
- ▶ Use gloves! Latex or vinyl gloves can reduce your risk of infection.
- ▶ Use lots of lube to prevent micro-tears and increase partner satisfaction. (Read further for a discussion on the best types of lube to use).
- ▶ Use a different hand or glove than the one used on yourself to touch or penetrate your partner.

## Sex with Toys

Some people enjoy using toys such as dildos, vibrators and butt plugs when having sex. To make sex with toys safer, try to avoid sharing toys that have been exposed to blood or other bodily fluids such as semen or vaginal fluids, as doing so can increase the risk of transmitting an STI. If you do share a sex toy with your partner(s), be sure to clean it thoroughly in-between uses with a mixture of bleach and water. However, it's important to note that leather sex toys cannot be cleaned with bleach and water. In those cases, you should follow the manufacturer's instructions.

### Safer Sex Tips:

- ▶ Wash non-leather sex toys with a mixture of bleach and water in-between uses.
- ▶ Consider placing a condom on sex toys used for penetrative types of sex.



## Oral Sex on a Vagina or an Anus

Some people enjoy using their mouth to stimulate a partner's vagina, vulva or clitoris (i.e., “cunnilingus”), or a partner's anus (i.e., “rimming,” “analingus”). To make performing oral sex on a vagina/anus safer, avoid engaging in this type of sexual activity if someone has bumps, sores or is bleeding from their vagina/anus, as doing so can put you and your partner at increased risk for contracting an STI. You should also avoid receiving oral sex from someone who has bumps, sores or is bleeding from their mouth.

### Safer Sex Tips:

- ▶ Place a latex dam (i.e., “dental dams”), plastic food wrap, or a cut-open condom over the vulva/anus. Drop the barrier? Get a new one.
- ▶ Place non-flavored lube on the inside of the dam and flavored lube on the outside for increased safety and pleasure.

## Oral Sex on a Penis

Some people enjoy using their mouth to stimulate a partner's penis (i.e., “fellatio,” “giving a blowjob”). To make performing oral sex on a penis safer, avoid engaging in this type of sexual activity if someone has bumps, sores, or is bleeding from their penis, as doing so can put you and your partner at increased risk for contracting an STI. You should also avoid receiving oral sex from someone who has bumps, sores or is bleeding from their mouth. It's also important to note that swallowing the penis (i.e., “deep throating”) can irritate the lining of the throat, making it easier to get or transmit an STI.

### Safer Sex Tips:

- ▶ Place a condom over the penis.
- ▶ Try using flavored condoms for increased pleasure.

## Sex with Vaginal or Anal Penetration

Some people enjoy engaging in vaginal or anal penetration (i.e., “intercourse”). To make sex with vaginal or anal penetration safer, avoid engaging in this type of sexual activity if someone has bumps, sores, or is bleeding from their genitals—including cuts, scrapes and menstrual blood, as doing so can make it easier to spread an STI. Additionally, it's important to keep in mind that the receptive partner in vaginal or anal sex (e.g., “the bottom”) is generally at higher risk for contracting STIs than the insertive partner (e.g., “the top”). Therefore, open and honest communication—and consent—is critical to having safer vaginal or anal sex.

### Safer Sex Tips:

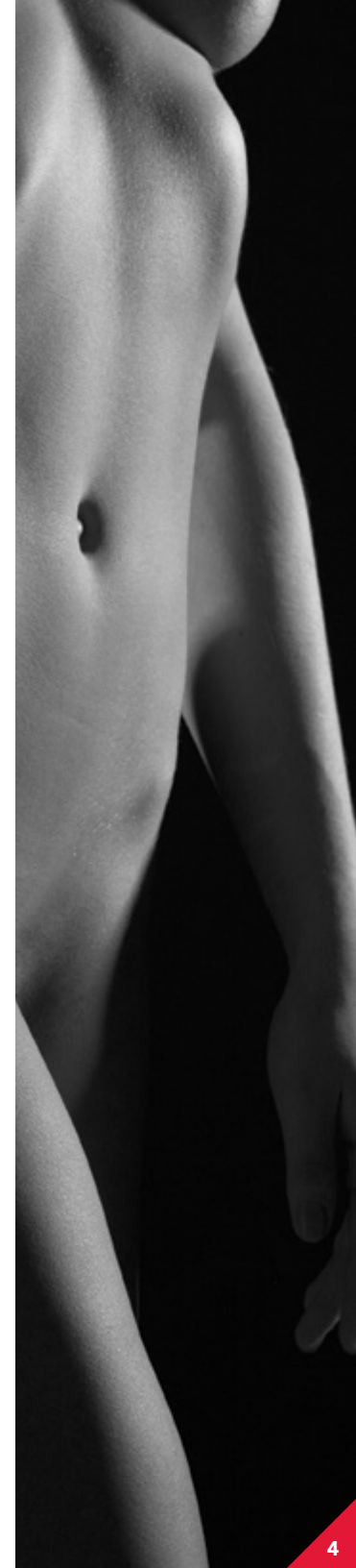
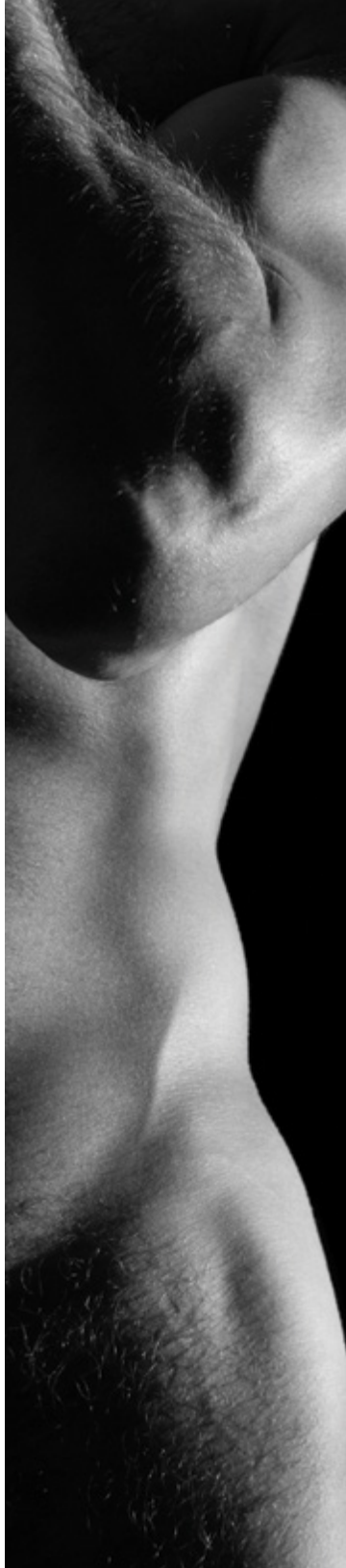
- ▶ Use a condom. Be sure to check the expiration date on the condom wrapper, as expired condoms are more likely to break during sex.
- ▶ Never use more than one condom on a penis at one time. Wearing one condom over another increases friction, which makes it more likely for both condoms to break during sex.
- ▶ Use lube. Lube reduces friction, which makes it easier for the condom to stay intact during sex. (Read further for a discussion on the best types of lube to use.)
- ▶ Make sure to put the condom on correctly. The tip of the condom should be facing upwards as it is rolled onto the penis.
- ▶ Pinch the tip of the condom after putting it on. This will leave space to collect the semen (i.e., “cum”), which will help prevent the condom from breaking.
- ▶ Hold onto the base of the condom while the penis is pulled out. This way, semen won't spill onto your partner.
- ▶ Use a new condom with each new sex act and each new partner.

## Sex without Penetration

Some people enjoy having sex by rubbing their genitals, or penis and anus, together without any sort of vaginal or anal penetration (i.e., “rubbing,” “dry humping”).

### Safer Sex Tips:

- ▶ Put a latex dam or long piece of plastic wrap between you and your partner if rubbing vulvas together.
- ▶ Use a condom and lube if rubbing a penis against a vulva, anus or another penis.



# Safer Sex and STIs

The term “sexually transmitted infection” or “STI” is one that is often casually thrown around, but rarely understood. STIs are infections that are passed from person to person through direct or indirect sexual contact and can cause serious health problems if left ignored. There are many different kinds of STIs, and they are incredibly common. In fact, 110 million Americans are thought to have an STI at any given point in time.

You can get an STI by having sex or other intimate contact with someone who already has an infection. Many people often do not know they have an STI because so few STIs produce recognizable symptoms. Fortunately, many STIs are treatable and even curable. For example, bacterial STIs such as syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia can be cured with antibiotics.

Some viral STIs such as HIV, herpes and HPV cannot be cured with antibiotics. But there are medications you can take to prevent them from seriously damaging your health, which can reduce the likelihood of passing on an infection. The only viral STI that can currently be cured with medication is hepatitis C. Ultimately, the only way to know if you have an STI is to get tested early and often.

**See the chart to learn which types of sex can put you at risk for potentially contracting one or more STIs.**



Contracting an STI causes many people to feel embarrassed and ashamed. However, it’s important to remember that STIs are incredibly common, and most are easily treatable. If you might have contracted an STI from a sexual partner, be sure to see a knowledgeable healthcare provider right away.

During your visit, you should try to be as forthcoming as possible with your provider about your reason for concern. This may require you to talk about your sexual history and recent partners. Rest assured that everything you disclose to your provider is strictly confidential. Finally, if you do indeed have an STI, consider notifying your recent sexual partners, including anyone you might be sleeping with now. Several state and local health departments offer anonymous partner notification services if you don’t feel comfortable sharing the information with them yourself.

Ultimately, the more you talk about the types of sex you like to have—and learn about the risks associated with them—the safer you’ll be. Honest communication and healthy decision-making can create the best and safest kinds of sex.

Type of Sex	Known Risks *	Theoretical Risks
<b>Sex with Toys</b>	▶ N/A	▶ Chlamydia ▶ Gonorrhea ▶ Hepatitis A ▶ Herpes ▶ HPV
<b>Sex with Fingers / Hands</b>	▶ N/A	▶ Chlamydia ▶ Gonorrhea ▶ Hepatitis A ▶ Herpes
<b>Oral Sex on a Vagina</b>	▶ Herpes	▶ HPV
<b>Oral Sex on an Anus</b>	▶ Parasites ▶ Hepatitis A	▶ HPV
<b>Oral Sex on a Penis</b>	▶ Chlamydia ▶ Gonorrhea ▶ Herpes ▶ Hepatitis B ▶ HIV ▶ HPV ▶ Syphilis	▶ Hepatitis A ▶ Hepatitis C
<b>Sex with Vaginal or Anal Penetration</b>	▶ Chlamydia ▶ Gonorrhea ▶ Herpes ▶ Hepatitis B ▶ HIV ▶ HPV ▶ Pubic Lice ▶ Scabies ▶ Syphilis ▶ Trichomoniasis	▶ Hepatitis C
<b>Sex without Penetration</b>	▶ Herpes ▶ HPV ▶ Pubic Lice ▶ Syphilis ▶ Yeast Infection	▶ N/A

Sources: Planned Parenthood, San Francisco City Health Clinic  
\* There are documented cases of STI transmission.

# Tools & Strategies for Having Safer Sex

There are many tools that are designed to help you have safer sex. Consider using one or more of the following tools depending on the types of sex you like to have and the risks associated with them.

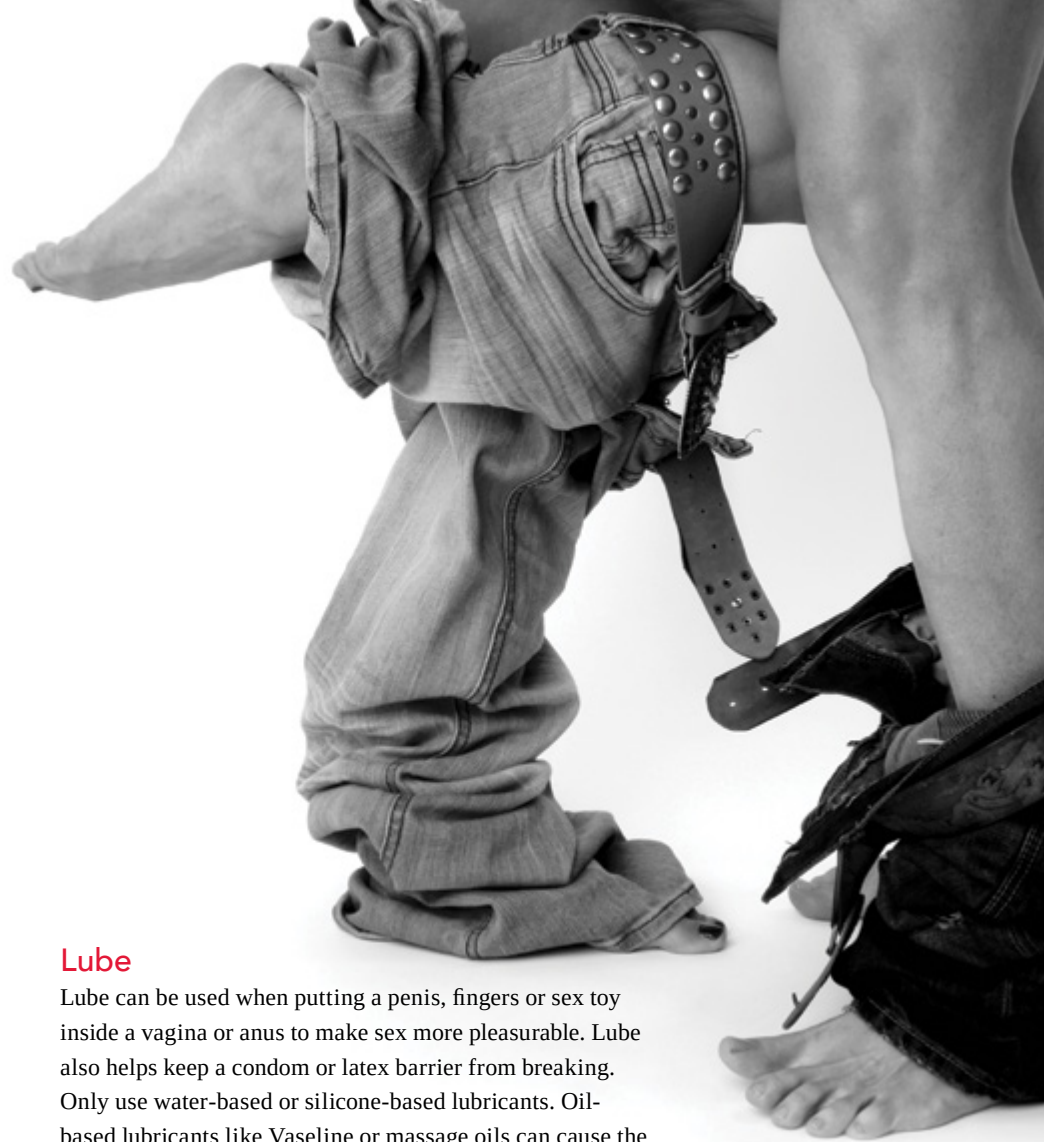
## Barriers

### Condoms

When used correctly, condoms greatly reduce the risk of getting or transmitting many STIs, including HIV. Condoms are also effective at preventing pregnancy. Condoms come in many shapes and sizes, so be sure to try out different kinds to see which ones feel best to you.

Some condom packages will say if the condom inside is lubricated or contains a spermicide. Avoid spermicides like Nonoxynol-9, as they can cause irritation of the vagina, anus and penis, which can increase the likelihood of contracting an STI. Most condoms are made of latex, but people with a latex allergy should use other kinds, such as polyurethane condoms. Avoid lambskin condoms because they do not prevent the spread of HIV. Also avoid purchasing condoms that are too large, as they can fall off during sex.

Insertive condoms, often also called female condoms (or FC2), are polyurethane condoms that can be placed inside of the vagina or anus before sex. Insertive condoms are effective in preventing pregnancy and the spread of STIs. When used correctly, insertive condoms collect semen and prevent bodily fluids from getting inside of the covered vagina or anus. Insertive condoms are also a great alternative for individuals allergic to latex.



### Lube

Lube can be used when putting a penis, fingers or sex toy inside a vagina or anus to make sex more pleasurable. Lube also helps keep a condom or latex barrier from breaking. Only use water-based or silicone-based lubricants. Oil-based lubricants like Vaseline or massage oils can cause the condom to break.

### Latex Barriers & Plastic Wrap

Latex barriers and plastic food wraps can be used for oral sex on a vagina or anus and may subsequently prevent the spread of many STIs. Latex barriers are square pieces of stretchy plastic.

### Gloves

Latex or vinyl gloves can be used when putting fingers inside an anus or vagina to reduce the risk of getting or transmitting STIs through tiny cuts on your hands or fingers.



# Medicines

## Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)

PrEP is an HIV prevention strategy that currently involves taking a once-daily pill to reduce the chance of acquiring HIV. As of this publication, the only pill that is FDA-approved for PrEP is a prescription medication sold under the brand name Truvada®. When paired with other safer sex practices, including condoms, and taken as prescribed by a knowledgeable healthcare provider, PrEP is upwards of 90 percent effective at preventing the spread of HIV. However, it's important to keep in mind that PrEP does not provide any protection against other STIs. Just like with other prescription medications, an important part of taking PrEP is making appointments with your provider to get routine STI screenings and other tests to make sure the regimen is still appropriate.

## Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)

PEP is an HIV prevention strategy that currently involves taking HIV medications immediately after a single high-risk event, such as condomless sex with a partner whose status you do not know. These medications stop HIV from making copies of itself and spreading throughout your body. PEP must be started as soon as possible to be effective, but no more than 72 hours after you may have been exposed to HIV. Two to three drugs are usually prescribed as part of PEP treatment, and they must be taken for 28 consecutive days. PEP does not provide protection against any other STIs. If you ever need to take PEP, you might also want to consider talking to your provider about PrEP.

## Staying healthy when you have HIV

Research shows people living with HIV who consistently take their medication can reduce the risk of passing on the virus by 96 percent. Therefore, having sex with people living with HIV who consistently take their medication and have achieved an undetectable viral load is a highly effective way to prevent the spread of HIV. Seeing a doctor regularly and having very low levels of HIV in the body (even though the virus is still there) are keys to staying healthy for people living with HIV.



## Contraception

While this document specifically deals with how to reduce the risk of getting or transmitting HIV and other STIs, contraception, or “birth control,” can be an important part of sexual health for some individuals and partners. In addition to condoms, contraception comes in the form of a pill, shot, patch, intrauterine device (i.e., “IUD”) and more. Speak with your provider about what types of contraception may be right for you.

## Vaccinations (Sexual Health)

Vaccines stimulate your immune system to produce antibodies, exactly like it would if you were exposed to a disease. After getting vaccinated, you develop immunity to that disease, without having to get the disease first. This is what makes vaccines such powerful medicine. There are a few vaccinations that can prevent infections that are spread through intimate, sexual contact with an infected partner. Getting these vaccinations can be a very important part of your overall sexual health and wellness. Talk to a knowledgeable healthcare provider to learn whether one, or more, of the following vaccines is right for you.

### ▶ HPV (Human Papillomavirus) Vaccination

This vaccine protects against many strains of HPV, the most common STI in the U.S. HPV can cause cancer and/or genital warts if left untreated.

### ▶ Hepatitis A Vaccination

This vaccine protects against hepatitis A, a virus that can cause serious illness if left untreated. Hepatitis A is easily spread through oral-to-anal sexual contact (i.e., “rimming”).

### ▶ Hepatitis B Vaccination

This vaccine protects against hepatitis B, another virus that can cause serious illness if left untreated. Hepatitis B is spread through contact with blood and bodily fluids just like HIV, but is much easier to transmit.



## WHITMAN-WALKER HEALTH

Established in 1978, Whitman-Walker Health is a non-profit, community health center serving the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Through four sites in the District of Columbia, Whitman-Walker Health offers primary medical and dental care; mental health and addictions counseling and treatment; HIV education, prevention, and testing; legal services; medical adherence case management; and more. Whitman-Walker Health is committed to meeting the health needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and people living with HIV/AIDS.



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## HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation improves the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people by working to increase understanding and encourage the adoption of LGBT-inclusive policies and practices. We build support for LGBT people among families and friends, co-workers and employers, pastors and parishioners, doctors and teachers, neighbors, and the general public. Through various programs and projects, we are enhancing the lived experiences of LGBT people and their families as we change hearts and minds across America and around the globe.