

Safer Sex

Knowing Your Body and Staying Healthy



AMERICAN
COLLEGE
HEALTH
ASSOCIATION

What Does “Safer Sex” Mean?

“Safer sex” means using strategies to enjoy sex while protecting yourself and your partner(s) from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy (if applicable). Keep reading to learn more about making safer choices if and when you choose to be sexually active—remembering that the only way to never experience an STI or unintended pregnancy is to avoid all sexual activity (this is called abstinence).

Consent

Whether you practice safer sex or not, establishing consent is mandatory before sexual activity with another person. Sexual activity without consent is assault.

You have the right...

- To be in a healthy, safe, and respectful sexual relationship—whether the relationship is long-term or lasts for one night.
- To decide what happens to your own body, whether that includes having sex or not.
- To communicate your feelings to your partner(s).

If any or all of these rights are not being respected, speak to your health care provider, counselor, or other trusted person to get resources and support.

Mixing Sexual Activity with Alcohol and/or Other Drugs

While some people may use alcohol or other drugs before sexual activity, consider how being sober can enhance your sexual experience. Alcohol and other drugs can not only make it more difficult to communicate with your partner(s)—and therefore more difficult to navigate consent—but can also negatively affect your judgment and sexual functioning. Staying sober during sexual activity may make you more likely to be happy with your decision later by allowing you to weigh the pros and cons beforehand and more fully experience pleasure.



Talk to Your Partner(s)!




This might seem uncomfortable or awkward at first, but it’s important to have a direct conversation with your partner(s) before any sexual activity. Remember that sex is most satisfying when everyone is on the same page. Here are some questions to think about:

- When were you and your partner(s) last tested for STIs, including HIV?
- Do you want to use condoms or other barrier methods?
- If applicable, will a method of birth control be used?
- Do you have an STI? Have you been diagnosed with an STI in the past?
- Is there a sexual activity you do/don’t want to try?
- Are you on PrEP (HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis, a medication that prevents HIV)?

STI Types and Getting Yourself Tested

Symptoms vary for each STI, though the most common experience is to have no symptoms at all. So, the only way to know you have an STI is to get yourself tested—at least annually if you are sexually active. You might even benefit from getting tested more frequently than once per year.

There is no single test that checks for all STIs, so make sure to talk to your health care provider about the type(s) of sex you have had (i.e., oral, vaginal, anal) so that you can be screened appropriately. For example, chlamydia and gonorrhea can infect the throat and rectum, too—not just the genitals—so you may need a throat or rectal swab.

Type	Name	How to Test
VIRAL Not curable (except sometimes hepatitis), but treatable 	HIV	Oral swab or blood
	HPV	Pap test at 21 if you have a cervix
	Hepatitis	Blood
	Herpes	Swab of sores
BACTERIAL Curable 	Chlamydia	Urine or swab
	Gonorrhea	Urine or swab
	Syphilis	Blood
PARASITIC Curable 	Crabs	Visual examination
	Scabies	Visual examination
	Trichomoniasis	Urine or swab

Talking to Your Partner(s) about Getting Tested

This conversation can be awkward, but it doesn't have to be! Here are four tips to help you talk to your partner(s) about STI/HIV testing:

1. Talk about testing for STIs/HIV before any sexual activity. Here are some conversation starters:
 - Have you ever been tested for STIs and HIV?
 - I got myself tested last month and my results were _____. What about you?
 - Your profile says you are HIV-negative. When was the last time you got yourself tested?

2. Choose a place in which you feel safe and comfortable, whether that is online or in person.
3. Know what you are going to say before you say it, and emphasize that you care about your partner's health as well as your own. If you are nervous, consider practicing in front of a mirror or with someone you know and trust.
4. If you feel safe doing so, suggest that you go together to get tested. This may show your partner that your motives are about care and respect instead of distrust. You will also have an immediate support system throughout the testing process.

Remember: Never ask someone if they have an STI/HIV by asking if they are "clean." This implies that people living with STIs/HIV are "dirty."

Spectrum of Sexual Risk for HIV



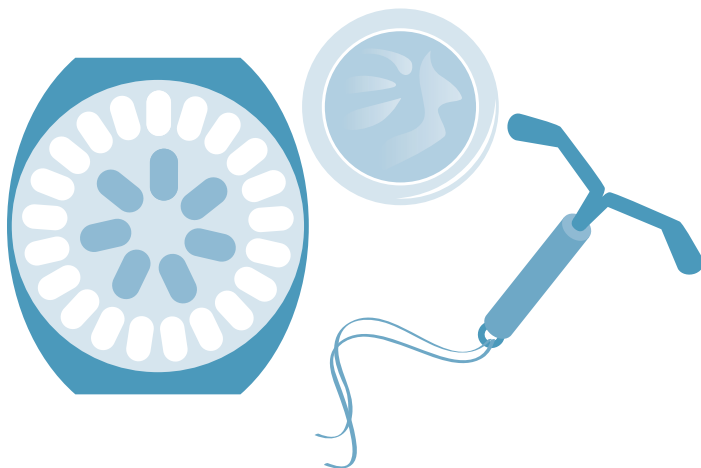
*This represents the risk level of sexual activity without protection such as condoms, PrEP, or antiretroviral therapy (ART).

Barrier Methods of Protection

Barrier methods such as external and internal condoms, dental dams, and capes are very effective at preventing STIs/HIV and pregnancy when used consistently and correctly. If you have a latex allergy, then make sure to use a safer sex product that is made with nitrile, polyurethane, or polyisoprene.

You can also use barrier methods with water- or silicone-based lubricant to enhance pleasure and reduce friction that can damage the skin and/or the barrier being used. Just remember not to use oil-based lubricants with latex products.

Many campus health centers and community agencies provide safer sex products for free or at a discounted price, so learn what your campus and community offer!



PrEP and PEP

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is a prescription medication that is highly effective at preventing HIV when taken daily as directed. PrEP is usually prescribed to people who are at a higher risk for HIV (having multiple partners, using barrier methods inconsistently, being in a sexual relationship with someone who is living with HIV, sharing needles, etc.). Talk with your health care provider about whether PrEP is right for you.

To find a PrEP provider near you, visit <https://preplocator.org>.

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is a prescription medication to prevent HIV that can be taken up to 72 hours after a possible HIV exposure—perhaps due to a sexual assault or an accidental needle stick, to name a couple of examples. The sooner PEP is taken, the more effective it will be, so get to your health care provider as soon as possible if you think you need it.

Get Vaccinated

HPV, hepatitis A, and hepatitis B are STIs that can be prevented with vaccines. The HPV vaccine protects against the most common types of HPV that cause genital warts and cancers of the mouth, throat, cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, and anus. The hepatitis A and B vaccines protect against the A and B types of viral hepatitis, which affect the liver in different ways. Talk to your health care provider about which vaccines are right for you!

Birth Control

It's simple, really. If a sperm cell fertilizes an egg that has been released from an ovary into the fallopian tubes, and that fertilized egg successfully implants in the uterus, then a pregnancy occurs.

Birth control can work in a couple different ways, depending on the method, by:

- Preventing the ovaries from releasing an egg.
- Preventing sperm from reaching an egg.

Birth control is an amazing tool that can not only prevent pregnancy but may also provide other health benefits—such as helping with acne or painful periods. There are lots of birth control options, and they can be either hormonal (e.g., implant, patch, hormonal IUD) or non-hormonal (e.g., internal and external condoms, copper IUD). If you are interested in birth control, it is important to talk to your provider about your options so that you can choose the method that is best for you—that is, the one that you can use consistently and correctly. It is important to remember that the only birth control methods that prevent STIs—including HIV—are condoms (external and internal) and abstinence.

For More Information

CDC Information

(800) CDC-INFO, (800) 232-4636

TTY: (888) 232-6348

In English, en Español

www.cdc.gov/std

Search for STI testing locations:

gettested.cdc.gov

American College Health Association

(410) 859-1500 | www.acha.org

© Copyright November 2021.

This brochure is for informational purposes only and is not meant to replace consultation with your health care provider. The information in this brochure does not constitute medical advice and should not be the basis for any diagnosis or treatment.