

Safer sex for gay men / Health Education Authority.

Contributors

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The background of the entire page is a black and white photograph of two men in a close embrace. Overlaid on this image are two large, stylized gender symbols: a purple male symbol (a circle with an arrow) and a white female symbol (a circle with a cross).

 Health Education Authority

Safer
SEX
for
GAY
MEN



What safer sex means

Everyone talks about HIV and AIDS but many gay men have been living with the epidemic and practising safer sex for many years now. This leaflet provides up-to-date information on safer sex and how to talk it through with your partner. The language is straightforward to ensure that the message is clear. Safer sex means that you care for yourself and your partners.

Safer sex — talking it through

Most people know the health risks of sex and have some idea about what is safe and what is not. Raising the subject of safer sex with someone you may want to have sex with can still be a problem.

Although it may be easier with someone you know well than it is with someone you have just met, talking it through takes careful handling.

So here are some tips:

Choose the right time

When you are physically close to someone there may be too much excitement around to discuss things coolly. Don't be persuaded to do something you might regret later, so pick a moment when your head still rules your feelings. Remember too that alcohol and drugs can cloud your judgement.

Be bold

If you are thinking of having penetrative sexual intercourse, discuss using a condom with your partner. He may be plucking up courage to mention the subject and the chances are that he will feel relieved rather than insulted. So don't beat about the bush, say something straightforward and simple like 'Have you got a condom? If not, I have.' By playing safe you are teaming up together to protect each other.

If you really can't discuss it...

... use a condom anyway or make a decision not to have high risk intercourse at all. There are many other ways of having sex safely (see reverse). Always remember to value your own judgements and try to feel able to say 'no' to something if it's outside the limits you have chosen.

How the virus is spread

AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) which can damage the body's defence system so that it cannot fight some infections. You or your partner may have this virus without developing any symptoms or illness. You can feel perfectly well but still pass the virus on.

In order for the virus to be transmitted by sexual contact, semen, blood or vaginal fluid must

pass from an infected person into the body of another person. If it cannot do this the virus will not be passed on. You **cannot** get HIV from social contact, for example by shaking hands, sharing knives and forks or from toilet seats. The virus may pass through cuts or sores on the skin surface, although waterproof plasters offer some protection.

Activities that carry RISK

Anal intercourse (often called fucking)

The highest risk of transmitting HIV sexually is through anal intercourse with or without a condom. This is why many gay men have decided to stop practising it. During anal intercourse, infected semen or blood can pass from one person to another through the lining of the anal passage and through tiny cuts that may occur.

The virus can also enter the penis through the opening at the tip, or through cuts or scratches on the penis.

Pulling out before ejaculation (coming) cannot be relied on to reduce the risk significantly.

Even when a condom is used there can be considerable risk if it breaks or slips off.

Anal intercourse with a condom

Condoms are now a part of everyday life and you can buy them from chemists, garages, record shops, supermarkets, barbers, clothes shops, pubs, slot machines and by mail order.

Look out for the BSI Kitemark as this means condoms are able to pass the British Standards test for quality of manufacture. **Remember**, condoms make anal intercourse **safer** not safe, as they are not intended for use in this way by the manufacturers. The use of condoms is perhaps best discussed with a trained adviser (see *Further Information*, p.8).

However, most condoms are lubricated and roll on easily. Follow the 'instructions for use' contained in the packet carefully. Use the condom with plenty of water-based lubricant (like KY Jelly). Don't use oil-based lubricants like petroleum jelly or other oils. Grease damages the rubber and will increase the risk of tearing the condom. If you are using rectal suppositories or a medicament or ointment which is applied to the penis, ask your doctor or pharmacist whether it will affect the condom.

Take the initiative, carry your own condoms and don't rely on the other person. It's better for both of you to be prepared than neither, if you decide to have sex where you need to use condoms. Remember to dispose of used condoms safely, by wrapping them in tissue and flushing them down the toilet.

Fisting

Fisting (although uncommon), is dangerous for both partners. It can tear the lining of the anal passage. Calving gloves, properly lubricated, reduce the risk of infection but do not eliminate it completely.

Rimming

Although there is no evidence that you can contract HIV by rimming (licking his anus) both partners are at particularly high risk from other infections including hepatitis. This in turn **may** increase the risk of developing AIDS if you are already infected by HIV.

Sex toys

Sharing sex toys, like vibrators, also carries risks as the virus can be passed on if you are sharing with someone who is infected.

Safer SEX *Activities*

It's important to remember that sex has never been totally risk free but a lot of activities carry no risk of transmitting HIV. Here are some of the more obvious ones:

Kissing

You cannot contract HIV by ordinary kissing and there is no conclusive evidence that it is transmitted by deep, French kissing even though the virus has been found in saliva. However, **theoretically** it is possible to be infected from deep kissing.

Masturbation (often called wanking)

Masturbation alone or with your partner is safe. You can ejaculate anywhere on his or your skin surfaces so long as semen which may contain the virus does not come into contact with open cuts or sores your partner might have.

Oral sex

There is no risk if you are the person who is being sucked. But if **you** are doing the sucking and you have cuts or sores in your mouth, there may be some risk. If you want him to ejaculate in your mouth it is safer if he wears a condom.

Oral sex, without getting pre-ejaculatory fluid (pre cum) or semen in your mouth may be safe, however no one is absolutely sure.

NB: The spermicide on some condoms may irritate the throat.

Digital intercourse (usually called fingering)

Sucking fingers is safe but if you intend to finger the anal passage, keeping your nails short will avoid damaging delicate areas like the lining. It is best not to finger if you have open cuts or sores on your hands, even if covered with a plaster.

Massage

Massage is a relaxing, safe and enjoyable activity. If you use oils to enhance the experience make sure you don't let any oil-based lubricants get into or onto condoms as they will perish the rubber.

Frottage (usually called body rubbing)

Rubbing your bodies together is perfectly safe. If you ejaculate, it is still safe so long as semen which may contain the virus does not come into contact with open cuts or sores your partner may have.

Further information

If you have other questions about AIDS or safer sex and would like to talk to a trained adviser, call the National AIDS Helpline on 0800 567 123. The service is free, confidential and available 24 hours a day. Other national telephone numbers that may be useful are the Terrence Higgins Trust on 071 242 1010, London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard on 071 837 7324.

Other local switchboards are also available. The National AIDS Helpline has a full listing. The national and local gay press carry regular information and articles about safer sex developments and AIDS research. Other leaflets with advice about safer sex, including the condom leaflet **Your guide to safer sex and the condom**, are available through health education units (in the phone book under the name of your local health authority) or from the Health Literature Line on 0800 555 777.

Local Information



Health Education Authority

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