How to have anal sex

FAST FACTS

- Anal sex is enjoyed by many people – straight, gay and bisexual.
- Unprotected anal sex carries a higher risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than many other sexual activities. Using a condom correctly will help protect you and your partner.
- Taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is another way to prevent HIV infection, but it may not be available everywhere.
- Use lots of lubricant! But only use water-based lubricant which is specially designed for sexual intercourse. Oil-based lubricants can cause condoms to break.
- If you are having oral sex or vaginal sex straight after anal sex put on a new condom to avoid cross infection.

Anal sex is any type of sexual activity that involves the anal area and many people, whether they are heterosexual, gay or bisexual, enjoy it. Whether you are thinking of having anal sex for the first time, or you just want more information on how to stay safe and enjoy it, this page will help answer your questions.

What is anal sex?

Most commonly, people think of anal sex as when a man’s penis enters the anus. However, it might also mean using fingers or sex toys to penetrate the anus, or using the tongue to stimulate the anus (called ‘rimming’). You can read more about oral-anal sex on our ‘How to have oral sex’ page.

Anyone can enjoy anal sex, whether they are a man, woman, gay, bisexual or straight, and whether they are giving or receiving it. Many gay men enjoy penetrative anal sex. But being gay doesn’t
mean you have to have anal sex – you decide what you enjoy!

**How do you have anal sex?**

It can feel strange when you start exploring the anal area during sex, so start slowly with touching and caressing to get used to the idea. If you don’t like it, it’s a good idea to talk to your partner and explain that anal sex isn’t for you. While lots of people enjoy it, many others would prefer to leave it out of their sexual activities.

If you decide to have penetrative anal sex, take things slowly and communicate with your partner. If you are giving anal sex, use plenty of lubricant and then start by penetrating just a little and then pulling out completely. When your partner is ready, penetrate a bit further and then pull out again. Continue with this until you are fully in – but be prepared to stop at any time if the other person is uncomfortable or in pain.

Anal sex can feel stimulating and pleasurable for both the person giving and receiving - but it can also take a while to get used to the sensation of it. If it doesn’t go perfectly the first time you can always try again when you’re both in the mood. Remember that you can pause or stop at any point you want. Just because you have started something doesn’t mean you need to continue – stopping is actually very normal.

**Anal sex, HIV and STI safety**

Whether you’re a man or a woman, straight or gay, it’s important to protect yourself against the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, when having anal sex.

The lining of the anus is thin and can easily be damaged, which makes it more vulnerable to infection. This means that if you are the receptive partner (often called the 'bottom') you have a higher risk of STIs and HIV from unprotected anal sex than many other types of sexual activity.

While the risk is less for the 'top' (or insertive partner), HIV can still enter through the opening at the top of the penis (urethra), or through cuts, scratches and sores on the penis.

STIs that can be passed on during anal sex include:

- HIV
- Chlamydia
- Genital herpes
- Genital warts
- Gonorrhoea
- Syphilis.

Using protection during anal sex is important to reduce your risk of catching an STI. For penetrative sex, make sure you use a condom and lots of lube - some people feel safer using extra-thick condoms for anal sex. Dental dams also offer good protection for rimming. Taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is another way to prevent HIV infection, but it may not be available everywhere.

You can use either a external condom (which goes on penises or sex toys) or an internal condom (which goes in vaginas or anuses, also called a female condom) for anal sex, depending on your preference. The female condom is inserted into the anus before sex, just as it would be used in the vagina.
It’s a good idea to put condoms on any sex toys you are using for anal sex too, making sure you change them between partners. Also use a fresh one if you are swapping between anal and vaginal stimulation. This is because the material of some sex toys may harbour bacteria and infections even after cleaning (though not HIV).

If you’ve had unprotected anal sex and are worried about possible HIV infection, go and see your healthcare professional straight away. You may be able to take post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) to prevent HIV infection, but it has to be taken within 72 hours to be effective. However, PEP is not a replacement for condoms and isn’t available everywhere.

**Love your lubrication**

Unlike the vagina, the anus doesn’t produce its own lubrication (or ‘lube’), so it’s important to use a good product to help the penis or sex toy move freely and prevent damage to the inside of the anus.

Don't use your partner's semen (also known as cum) as a lubricant. It's best to use a water-based lubricant which has been specially designed for sexual intercourse. Oil-based lubricants (such as lotion and moisturiser) can weaken condoms and make them more likely to break.

**How do I stimulate a man's prostate gland?**

Many men also like having their prostate stimulated. The prostate is a walnut-sized gland located just below the bladder and is highly sensitive to stimulation (usually gentle finger stimulation through the anus). However, there are many blood vessels in and around the prostate and it can get bruised if handled roughly, so always treat it gently and use lots of lube.

**Is anal sex painful?**

For lots of people anal sex is a pleasurable part of their sex life. However, whether you are a man or a woman, penetrative anal sex can be uncomfortable or even painful if rushed, especially if it’s your first time.

Luckily, there are things you can do to lessen any pain. These include going slowly, working your way up to penetration with the penis with smaller objects such as fingers or sex toys, and using a lot of water-based lubrication.

Continual communication as you progress is the best way to make sure you both enjoy anal sex. If at any time you are feeling strong pain then you should stop immediately.

**Safety for women having anal sex**

Be careful not to use the same finger to stimulate a woman’s anus as you use to touch her vagina. This is because you could transfer small amounts of faeces to the vagina which can cause urinary tract infections such as cystitis.

The same goes for using a finger to stimulate the anus and then putting it in the mouth, as this can pass on STIs such as hepatitis and shigella.

If you have anal sex and then move onto vaginal sex or oral sex you should use a fresh condom to prevent these infections. The same applies if you are using sex toys.

Technically, it’s not possible to get pregnant from anal sex as there’s no way for semen to get from
the rectum into the vagina. Be aware that there is a small chance of semen leaking out and dripping into the vagina after anal sex. Using condoms is the best way to make sure you are always protected properly against STIs and pregnancy.

Should I have anal sex?

As with any type of sex, it’s important that both people are enthusiastic about having anal sex and that no one is feeling pressured or forced into doing anything they don’t want to do.

Talk to your partner about protection before you start having anal sex to help things go more smoothly. Remember that having unprotected anal sex puts you and your partner at higher risk of HIV and other STIs such as hepatitis A and shigella than other sexual activities. Being safe will help you both feel more relaxed and make sex more enjoyable.

Deciding whether to have anal sex is a very personal thing. The main things to consider are whether it feels right, and whether you and your partner are both sure. Our article ‘Am I ready for sex?’ will help you think about this.

©iStock.com/nico_blue. Photos are used for illustrative purposes. They do not imply any health status or behaviour on the part of the people in the photo.

Sources:

NHS 'Is sex painful the first time?'
NHS ‘Does anal sex have any health risks?’
NHS ‘Know your prostate’
Good in bed 'Prostate stimulation and male sexual pleasure'
NHS ‘Sex activities and risk’
British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) 'A BASHH guide to condoms'

Last full review: 05 June 2017
Next full review: 05 June 2020
Last updated: 19 April 2018