Female condoms - how to use a female (internal) condom

FAST FACTS

- A female condom is a thin pouch that can be placed in the vagina or anus before sex.
- The condom forms a barrier to protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, and unplanned pregnancy.
- Some men and women find the inner and outer rings of the internal condom make sex more pleasurable.

Female condoms (also known as internal condoms or Femidons) prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and pregnancy during vaginal sex. They can also be used inside the anus to protect from STIs. You might also want to take a look at our male (external) condom page for information on how to use those.

What is a female condom?

A female condom is worn inside the vagina or anus to create a barrier to stop bodily fluids and semen from entering the body. They are made from a soft plastic material called nitrile.

Though these are called female condoms, they can be used by people of any gender for protection during anal sex.

You can often get female condoms free from sexual health clinics or healthcare professionals, and they are sold in some shops and pharmacies. If you can't find these condoms locally, they are available online. There are different types of female condoms, common brands include Femidom, Dominique, Femy, Myfemy, Protectiv, Elegance, Della and Care.
Why should I use them?

They work really well.

When used correctly, condoms provide excellent protection against HIV, pregnancy and most STIs. In fact, they are the only type of contraception that also stops you getting or giving STIs (including HIV).

If you use a condom, you can relax and enjoy sex knowing that you and your partner are protected.

Top tips for using female condoms

- Condoms only offer protection against STIs, HIV and pregnancy if you use them every time you have sex.
- Don’t double up! Using an internal condom at the same time as an external (male) one does not make sex safer. Instead it causes friction and the condom may break.
- Use a new condom every time you have sex or if you move between vaginal, anal or oral sex.

How to use a female condom

Though they may seem daunting at first, female condoms are easy to use with a bit of practice.

Before you begin

- Check the condoms are within the date on the packet and make sure you use ones with a mark (FDA, CE, ISO or Kitemark) that guarantees they meet safety standards.
- Keep the condoms somewhere close to hand (like in your bag or next to your bed) but not in a pocket or anywhere they can get hot, crumpled or damaged.
- Take the condom out of the packet carefully so you do not rip it - don’t use your teeth or scissors and be careful with sharp fingernails or jewellery.

Vaginal sex
There are instructions in the packet and you can get advice on how to insert a condom from a sexual health professional. These are the steps:

1. Sit, squat, lie or stand in a comfortable position, similar to how you would insert a tampon. Squeeze the smaller ring at the closed end of the condom and insert it into your vagina as far as it will go, making sure it doesn’t twist. The large ring at the open end of the female condom will cover the area around the vaginal opening – this part will sit outside your body.

2. When you have sex the penis should enter into the condom, rather than between the condom and the side of your vagina. You can help guide your partner to ensure it goes in the right place.

3. After sex, twist the large ring to prevent semen from leaking out and gently pull the female condom out.

4. Always use a new condom each time you have sex.

Anal sex

Female condoms can be used by a person of any gender to protect against STIs, including HIV, during anal sex. If you’re using the condom for anal sex you wear it like a male condom. Put lubricant inside the condom and place it on the penis, put plenty more lube on the outside of the condom and around the anus before inserting the penis gradually. You can also place the condom in the anus before sex, as you do for vaginal sex. To do this follow these steps:

1. Use lube around the anus first, then squeeze the inner ring of the condom to form an oval shape and push it into the rectum.

2. Put your finger inside the condom and push it as far up as you can. The outer ring should stay
outside the anus. Do not try to remove the inner ring, you may break the condom.

3. After sex, when you are ready, withdraw the penis. Then twist the external ring a few times and gently pull the condom out ensuring no semen is spilt.

Make sure you use plenty of lubricant during sex, because the anus doesn’t create its own. Lube also help to reduce the chance of passing on STIs and HIV.

Female condoms vs male condoms

Both types of condoms are just as effective as long as they are used correctly. It is good to understand both options. You could experiment with both, you may be surprised which you prefer. Here are a few things to think about:

Interruptions

Male condoms need to be put on just before sex, when the penis is erect, but a female condom can be inserted earlier (up to eight hours before sex). So, with female condoms there are no interruptions in the heat of the moment and the penis can be put into or near the vagina or anus before it’s fully erect.

Sensitive types

Most male condoms are made of latex and some people are sensitive to this. Female condoms are made from nitrile. This is hypoallergenic, so it doesn’t irritate sensitive genital skin.

Size matters

If you find a male condom doesn’t feel comfortable during sex, then a female condom might be the answer. Female condoms are larger and don’t fit snugly around the penis. This means they give the penis more breathing room. Some men prefer them as they find them more comfortable and can make it easier to keep an erection.

Maximum pleasure

Using female condoms can make sex more pleasurable for men and women. During vaginal sex, the female condom’s inner ring may stimulate the tip of the penis, and the external ring can rub against the vulva and clitoris - this can feel great for both of you.

... and relax

Unlike a male condom, a female condom does not need an erection to stay in place, so your partner does not have to withdraw straight after ejaculation. You can relax after sex and remove the female condom when it suits you both.

Taking control

You might choose to include the condom in your foreplay letting your partner put it in for you. Or you may prefer being in control yourself and feel more relaxed if you are responsible for inserting the condom. However awkward it may feel at first, you will become more comfortable and will learn what
works best for you.

What to do if a condom breaks

It’s very rare for a condom to break when used properly but if it does split or break or something else goes wrong like the outer ring moves up inside the vagina / anus, there are some simple things you can do:

- withdraw the penis immediately
- remove as much semen (cum) as you can
- gently wash the outside of your genitals - avoid washing inside your vagina or anus (douching) as this can spread infection further or cause irritation
- if you’ve been having vaginal sex go to the bathroom and pee to flush away any semen
- if you haven’t been using any other contraceptive to prevent pregnancy, you may need to access emergency contraception to prevent pregnancy. This should be done within 72 hours of having sex.

Get tested

Visit a health facility. They will probably advise you to have a sexual health test around 10 days after exposure (or earlier if you’re worried about any symptoms) and then again around three months later. This is because different STIs become detectable at different times after infection.

If your partner has HIV

If your partner is on regular treatment and their viral load has been undetectable for at least the last six months, there is no risk of HIV transmission (but this should not stop you both from getting tested for other STIs).

If your partner is not on regular treatment or is unsure how well they are responding to treatment, you need to visit a sexual health professional as soon as possible. You may be offered post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatment. This involves taking antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) for a month to reduce the chance of becoming HIV-positive. PEP has a high success rate, but it is not a replacement for condoms, it is a powerful drug with side effects and is not appropriate for everyone.

If you’re in a relationship with someone who is living with HIV, you might consider using pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to protect you from HIV transmission, but don’t forget, this will not protect you from other STIs or pregnancy.

Safer sex for trans people

Whether you’ve had lower surgery or not, the best way to protect yourself and your partner against STIs and HIV is to use a condom (either female or male) with water-based lube. Not all trans women can use female condoms, it depends on the depth of your vagina.

If you’ve recently had surgery, you should be extra careful. Your skin may not have healed and can bleed easily, making it easier for you to acquire or pass on HIV.
How do I talk to my partner about condoms?

You may feel embarrassed to talk about using condoms, especially at the beginning of a relationship, but don't let that stand in the way of protecting yourself against STIs, HIV and pregnancy. Talking to your partner about condoms isn't a sign that you don't trust them – it's a way of showing you care and want to protect you both.

If your partner refuses to use a condom don't feel pressured into having unprotected sex – remember you always have the right to decide whether or not to have sex.

Try and have the conversation beforehand rather than in the heat of the moment, then you can feel safe to relax and enjoy sex.

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Sources:

- NHS Choices 'Female condom'
- Planned Parenthood 'Internal condom'
- AIDSMap 'Female condoms for anal sex'
- Terrence Higgins Trust (THT) (2014) 'Post exposure prophylaxis'