What is a condom?

A condom is a thin piece of material that fits over a man’s penis (male condom) or inside a woman’s vagina (female condom) during sex.

It is the only method that protects against both pregnancy and sexual transmission of HIV or sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

How do condoms work?

Sexual fluids such as semen, vaginal fluids and blood can transmit HIV and STIs.

A condom forms a barrier between bodily fluids and entry points for HIV, such as:

- vagina
- anus
- penis (urethra)
- mouth*

* only if there are large open sores or bleeding gums.

When should I use a condom?

Use a condom:

- before any penetrative sexual activities
- during vaginal, anal and oral sex
- every time you have sex
- on shared sex toys. Put a new condom on for each partner.

Condom types

There are two main types of condom.

The male condom:

The most common type of condom. It fits close to the penis.

The female condom:

Wider than the male condom, it fits inside the vagina or anus.

Use our ‘How to use a female condom’ infographic for information about using a female condom.

A dental dam is a sheet of latex that can be used for protection during oral sex. Or, try a flavoured condom cut open!
Both partners should be tested for HIV and STIs. Access emergency HIV treatment if you are at risk of HIV infection.

Allergic to latex condoms? Not all condoms are made of latex. Polyurethane or polyisoprene condoms are also available.

Condom effectiveness

Condoms are very effective at protecting against HIV, other STIs and pregnancy.

Remember…

- Use a new condom every time you have sex.
- Always use extra water-based lubricant during anal sex.
- Use certified condoms E.g. FDA, CE, ISO, Kitemark.
- Some STIs are transmitted by skin-to-skin contact - condoms cannot protect you from these.

Know your rights

You have the right to:

- insist on using a condom every time
- refuse sex without a condom
- use a new condom over shared sex toys.

Condom shapes and sizes

Condoms come in various shapes and sizes...

- Standard condoms have straight sides.
- Fitted condoms are indented below the head of the penis.
- Large condoms are longer and wider giving more room.
- Some condoms are wider over the head of the penis.
- Extra strong condoms are thicker - important for anal sex.
- Textured condoms, with ribs or bumps, can increase sensation for both partners.
- Coloured or flavoured condoms can make oral sex more enjoyable.

Condom and lubricant tips

You can get condoms and lubricant from...

- Your doctor or healthcare provider.
- A sexual health or government clinic.
- Stores and pharmacies.
- The Internet.
- Some charities, healthcare clinics or gay bars provide free condoms.

If the condom breaks during sex...

- Withdraw the penis immediately and use a new condom.
- Access emergency contraception if not using other contraceptive methods.

Using lubricants

Lubricant (or lube) is a water, silicone or oil-based substance.

- Never use oil-based lubricants (e.g. massage oils or Vaseline) with latex condoms – they can break.
- Many condoms are covered in some lubricant.

Stimulating (e.g. warms or tingles) and flavoured lubricants are available.