HEALTH BASICS

Condoms - male

A male condom is a thin barrier worn on the penis to reduce pregnancy and infection risks during sex.

WHAT IT IS
A barrier worn on the penis during sex

WHERE IT COMES UP
Contraception and protection during vaginal, anal, or oral sex

WHY IT MATTERS
Lowers pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection risks

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Pharmacist, sexual health clinic, or primary care clinician

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Expiry date and package inspection before use

Overview

A male condom is a thin covering worn over an erect penis during sex. It is also called an external condom. It acts as a barrier, helping to keep semen and other sexual fluids from passing between partners.

Condoms can reduce the chance of pregnancy during penis-in-vagina sex. They can also lower the risk of many sexually transmitted infections, or STIs, during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. They do not remove these risks completely.

Most external condoms are made from latex rubber. Latex-free options include polyurethane and synthetic rubber materials such as polyisoprene. Condoms made from natural membrane, sometimes called lambskin condoms, may help prevent pregnancy but should not be relied on for protection from HIV or other STIs.

Condoms are available without a prescription. Sexual health services and community programs may provide them free of charge.

How it works

A condom catches semen after ejaculation and limits contact with sexual fluids. This can stop sperm from entering the vagina and reduce exposure to infections carried in semen, vaginal fluid, rectal fluid, or blood.

A condom should be put on before the penis touches a partner's mouth, genitals, or anus. Some infections and sperm-containing fluid can be present before ejaculation.

To use an external condom:

Use a new condom for every sex act and whenever changing between oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Do not wash or reuse condoms. Do not wear two external condoms together, or an external and internal condom at the same time. Friction between them can make breakage more likely.

Water-based and silicone-based lubricants are generally compatible with latex condoms. Oil-based products, including petroleum jelly, massage oil, body lotion, and some cooking oils, can damage latex. For non-latex condoms, follow the lubricant instructions on the package.

- Check the expiry date and make sure the sealed package is not damaged.
- Open the package carefully without using teeth, scissors, or sharp nails.
- Place the condom on the tip of the erect penis with the rolled edge facing outward.
- Pinch the tip to remove trapped air and leave space for semen.
- Roll it down to the base of the penis.
- Use suitable lubricant if needed.
- After ejaculation, hold the condom at its base while withdrawing.
- Remove it away from your partner, tie or wrap it, and place it in a bin.

Why it matters for your health

Condoms are the only widely available contraceptive method that can protect against both pregnancy and STIs. They can be used alone or with another form of contraception.

Protection depends on using a condom correctly from the start to the end of every sex act. Even with correct use, no condom provides complete protection.

Condoms tend to offer better STI protection against infections mainly spread through sexual fluids, such as HIV, gonorrhoea, and chlamydia. Protection may be lower for infections spread through uncovered skin or sores, including genital herpes, human papillomavirus, or HPV, and syphilis.

A condom does not cover the entire genital area. Vaccination, STI testing, and other prevention methods may therefore still matter. HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis, known as PrEP,

is another option for some people with an ongoing chance of HIV exposure. PrEP does not prevent pregnancy or other STIs.

Condoms do not affect long-term fertility. They contain no hormones and are used only when having sex.

What can go wrong

A condom can split, slip off, leak, or be used too late. This may create a risk of pregnancy or exposure to an STI. Common contributing situations include:

If a condom is initially placed the wrong way around, use a new one rather than turning it over. Fluid on the penis may have touched the condom.

Latex can cause irritation or, less commonly, an allergic reaction. Possible reactions relate to latex itself, lubricant, spermicide, or another ingredient. Latex-free condoms may be an option if latex is a concern.

Some condoms contain the spermicide nonoxynol-9. It can irritate genital or rectal tissue when used frequently and does not provide extra STI protection. Check the package if you want to avoid it.

Routine follow-up: Arrange non-urgent advice if condoms often break or slip, if irritation keeps returning, or if you are unsure which size, material, or lubricant to use. A pharmacist or sexual health service can help. STI screening may also be appropriate after a new partner or according to local screening advice, even when no condom problem occurred.

Urgent advice: If a condom fails during penis-in-vagina sex and pregnancy is possible, ask a pharmacist, sexual health clinic, or other healthcare service about emergency contraception as soon as possible. Available methods have different time limits, with some usable up to five days after sex.

If there may have been exposure to HIV, seek urgent advice about HIV post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP. It must be started within 72 hours, and earlier is better.

Emergency care: Call emergency services for trouble breathing, swelling of the tongue or throat, faintness, or another severe allergic reaction.

- Using a condom after its expiry date
- Damaging it while opening the package
- Putting it on only shortly before ejaculation
- Putting it on the wrong way and then turning it over

- Using an oil-based lubricant with latex
- Not using enough lubricant, especially during anal sex
- Using two condoms at once
- Reusing a condom
- Storing condoms for long periods in heat, direct sunlight, or a wallet

What you can do

Before sex, check the expiry date, package condition, material, size, and lubricant instructions. Keep condoms somewhere cool and dry. Avoid storing them for long periods in a car, wallet, or other place exposed to heat or friction.

A condom should fit securely without feeling painfully tight. It should roll down fully and remain in place. If condoms repeatedly split or slip, try a different size or style and review how they are being used.

If a condom breaks or comes off:

STI tests have different "window periods." This means an infection may not show on a test immediately after exposure. A sexual health service can help plan the right tests and whether any need repeating.

If the condom remains intact and there are no concerns about pregnancy, infection, or irritation, no medical check is required simply because a condom was used.

- Stop and replace it with a new condom
- Consider emergency contraception if pregnancy is possible
- Ask promptly whether HIV PEP is appropriate
- Ask a sexual health service which STI tests are suitable and when to take them
- Record the date of the exposure and any emergency treatment taken

Common questions

Can condoms be used during oral or anal sex?

Yes. Condoms can lower STI exposure during oral and anal sex. For anal sex, generous compatible lubricant can reduce friction and the chance of breakage.

Can I use the same condom more than once?

No. Use a new condom for each sex act and each change between oral, vaginal, and anal sex.

Do condoms protect against every STI?

No. They lower the risk of many STIs but offer less protection against infections spread from uncovered skin. Correct use from start to finish gives the best protection.

Are latex-free condoms effective?

Latex-free synthetic condoms can provide pregnancy and STI protection when used correctly. Natural membrane condoms should not be used when STI protection is needed. Check the package because materials and lubricant compatibility differ.

Should condoms be used with another contraceptive?

They can be. Combining condoms with another contraceptive method adds pregnancy protection while keeping the STI protection condoms provide.

Can a condom get lost inside the body?

A condom can slip into the vagina or rectum, but it cannot travel through the rest of the body. Remove it gently if you can reach it. Seek medical help if it cannot be removed or if there is pain or bleeding.

Sources

- World Health Organization. Condoms
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Condom Use: An Overview
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Preventing HIV with PEP
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. U.S. Selected Practice Recommendations for Contraceptive Use, 2024
- NHS. Condoms