



Sexual health **for women**



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Relax and enjoy!

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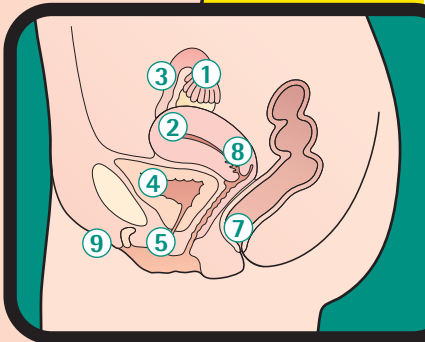
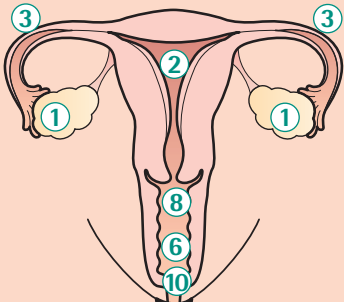
Sexual health is about being able to enjoy your sexuality in a way that also protects your health and well-being.

The best way to protect your own and your partner's sexual health is to practise safer sex.

Safer sex means knowing the risks you face. It also means taking steps to reduce your chances of getting or passing on a sexually transmitted infection, or having an unplanned pregnancy.

And because safer sex reduces your risks, you can relax and enjoy sex even more.

Your **body**



Your **body**

1 Ovary

You have two ovaries, each about the size of an almond, which produce the eggs, or ova.

2 Womb, or uterus

This is about the size and shape of a small, upside-down pear. It is made of muscle and grows in size as the baby grows.

3 Fallopian tube

You have two tubes leading from the ovaries to the womb.

4 Bladder

This is a bag made of muscle and tissue which holds urine.

5 Urethra, or water passage

This is a tube which carries urine from the bladder.

6 Vagina

This is a tube about 8 cm (3 in) long. It leads from the cervix to the vulva, where it opens between the legs. The vagina is very elastic so it can easily stretch around a man's penis, or when a baby is born.

7 Anus

This is an opening at the lower end of the bowel which is kept closed by two muscles.

8 Cervix

This is the neck of the womb. It is normally almost closed, with just a small opening for blood to pass through during the monthly period.

9 Clitoris

This is a small, sensitive organ which swells and goes hard during sex. When the clitoris is stimulated during sex it can lead to orgasm.

10 Vulva

Your vulva looks like two flaps of skin. It lies outside the body next to the vagina

What about **breast cancer**?



1 in 12

women in the UK develops breast cancer

It is one of the most common forms of cancer in women. Although it rarely affects women under the age of 35, women of all ages should get to know the normal look and feel of their breasts. If you notice anything that worries you, you should see a doctor.

Breast screening (mammography) is an x-ray examination which can help to find small changes in the breast. If changes are caught early, there's a good chance they can be successfully treated.

If your mother, sister or even grandparent have developed breast cancer, you may want to speak to your GP if you are worried about getting cancer yourself.



The NHS offers a free breast-screening session to all women between the ages of 50 and 64, as long as they are registered with a GP. Older women can also have three-yearly screening if they ask for this.

It's a good idea for everyone who is invited to go for a screening, and for older women to ask for a three-yearly screening.

Screening can save lives

Be breast aware

- Get to know your breasts and the natural changes that take place during your normal monthly cycle.
- Look at your breasts while you are getting changed, or feel them while you are in the bath or shower.
- Look for any changes, such as a lump or thickening in the breast or armpit; any unusual pain or discharge from the nipple; unusual changes in the outline, shape or size of the breast; or any unusual sensation.
- If you find a change that is unusual, contact your GP as soon as possible. There may be many reasons for changes in the breast. Most of them are harmless, but all of them should be checked, as there is a small chance that they could be the first sign of cancer.

For more information on breast cancer, call the following free helplines: Cancerbacup on 0808 800 1234. Cancerlink on 08088 080 000.

What is the **cervical smear test**?



The cervical smear test is simple, quick and painless. It checks the health of the cervix (the lower part of the womb). For most women, it shows that the cells of the cervix are normal and healthy. The smear can show signs that cancer of the cervix may develop and the growth can be stopped by simple treatment before it even gets started.

**Regular smear tests
are important**

You can get a smear test at your GP surgery, or at family planning or NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics.

Regular smear tests are important. They pick up the early warning signals that could save your life. The NHS now offers all women aged 20 to 64 a free cervical smear test every 3 to 5 years. You should be tested more often if cell changes are found when you have a smear.

For more information on cervical cancer, call the following free helplines: Cancerbacup on 0808 800 1234. Cancerlink on 08088 080 000.

I don't want to get **pregnant**

If you don't want to become pregnant, you need to use a reliable method of contraception every time you have sex. No contraception will give 100% protection against pregnancy, but all the methods available in the UK are very effective when you use them correctly and consistently. All contraceptives are available free of charge.

Different methods of contraception suit different people at different times – choose a method that suits you.

Use a reliable method of contraception every time you have sex

You can get pregnant if you have sex without using contraception, or if something stops your contraceptive method from working properly (for example if you missed one or more pills, or if a condom split or slipped off).

I don't want to get **pregnant**



Reversible methods of contraception

Contraceptive methods work in different ways and protect against pregnancy for different lengths of time. With some methods, how well they protect against pregnancy depends on how carefully they are used. It is important to use these methods correctly and consistently according to instructions.

- Combined pill
- Progestogen-only pill
- Male condom
- Female condom
- Diaphragm or cap with spermicide
- Natural family planning

With other contraceptives, how well they protect against pregnancy does not depend on the person using them. These methods protect against pregnancy until it is time for them to be renewed or replaced by a doctor or nurse.

- Contraceptive injection
- Contraceptive implants
- Intrauterine system (IUS)
- Intrauterine device (IUD), which used to be called the coil



If in doubt, ASK!

Permanent methods

Sterilisation (male and female) is different from other contraceptive methods because it is permanent. You should only choose sterilisation if you are sure you will never want a baby in the future.

If you use condoms on their own or with other contraceptive methods every time you have sex, they can also help protect you against sexually transmitted infections.

Free information and advice

When you choose or change your contraceptive method, make sure you have all the information you need. Make sure that you understand how to use it, and know what to do and where to get advice if you have any difficulties.

You can get information from a doctor or nurse at your GP surgery or family-planning clinic. They can help you decide which is the best method for you.

Information and advice are also available from the Contraceptive Education Service helpline on 0845 310 1334.

I need **emergency** contraception

If you have sex without using contraception or if something stops your contraceptive method from working properly (for example, if you missed one or more pills, or if a condom split or slipped off), and you think you are at risk of pregnancy, you may be able to use emergency contraception. This works after you've had sex and before pregnancy begins.

There are two types of emergency contraception:



Emergency contraceptive pills (which used to be called the 'morning after pill').

These must be started within three days (72 hours) from the time you had sex. They are most effective if you start taking them within 24 hours of sex.



An IUD fitted within 5 days from the time you had sex. Once it has been fitted you can keep it as a regular method of contraception, or you can have it taken out when your next period starts.

You can get emergency contraception free from most GPs (not just your own doctor) and any family planning clinic. Some NHS GUM or sexual health clinics and hospital accident and emergency departments also provide it. You can also buy emergency contraception from most pharmacies if you are 16 years or over.

Trying for a **baby**?



Take a **400**
microgram folic acid
supplement every day

If you want to become pregnant, you should:

- give up smoking
- drink no more than 1 or 2 units of alcohol, once or twice a week and avoid getting drunk (1 unit = half a pint of ordinary strength lager, beer or cider **or** a 25ml pub measure of spirit **or** a small glass of wine); and
- take a 400 microgram folic acid supplement every day, from the day you start trying for a baby until you are 12 weeks pregnant.

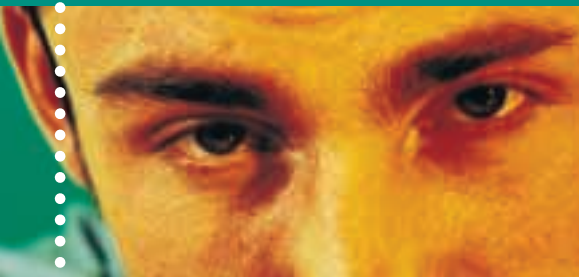
Folic acid is a B vitamin which can help to reduce birth defects such as spina bifida developing in your unborn baby. For more information, call NHS Direct free on 0845 4647.

It can take many months to get pregnant. One in six couples have fertility problems. There are many causes for this, some of which can be treated. If you have been trying to become pregnant for at least one year, see your doctor for advice. You can also get specialist advice from Issue on 01922 722 888 (see also page 23).

Female fertility decreases with age so it is harder to get pregnant, especially after 35.

If you or your partner have had health problems which might affect your chances of having a baby it is a good idea to see a doctor before you begin trying for a baby.

Are **sexually transmitted infections** common?



Anyone can get a sexually transmitted infection if they have unprotected sex with someone who is infected. Sexually transmitted infections happen frequently in both men and women.

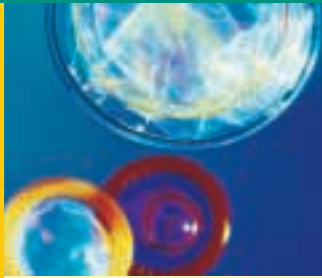
Some of the more common sexually transmitted infections include:

- genital warts;
- chlamydia;
- genital herpes; and
- gonorrhoea (the clap).

Often there are no symptoms, so you or your sexual partner could have an infection and not know it. Get medical advice straight away if you think you or your partner might have an infection.

Most sexually transmitted infections can be treated quickly and easily if you detect them early on. Some can cause serious long-term problems if you don't get them treated. For example, chlamydia and gonorrhoea can lead to infertility. And HIV infection is still a very serious condition, despite advances in treatment for many of the illnesses that people with HIV are likely to get.

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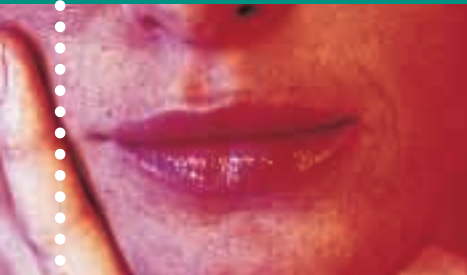


You can reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection by doing the following.

- Always use a condom when you have vaginal, or anal sex and consider using one for oral sex.
- You can explore other ways of having sex such as kissing, stroking and touching.
- Use a dental dam (a thin latex-square barrier) to cover the vulva or anus during oral sex. You can get dental dams from some sexual health clinics, chemists and mail-order agencies. Contact the National AIDS Helpline for details free on 0800 567 123.
- Put condoms on sex toys such as vibrators or dildos if they are being shared. Wash the sex toy between activities and put on a new condom for each partner and activity. Do not use the same condom for vaginal sex after you have used it in the anal area as you could transfer bacteria which may cause an infection in the vagina.
- You can use latex gloves with a lubricant before you insert a finger or hand in the vagina or anus.

Remember that symptoms may not appear for months, and some people get no symptoms at all. Others have symptoms which come and go even though the infection is still there.

What about **thrush** and **cystitis**?



Unprotected sex is not the only way you can get an infection in the genital area. You can get some infections such as thrush and cystitis even if you have never had sex.

If you get these often, don't use perfumed bubble bath and deodorants in the genital area. Wash and wipe your bottom from front to back so you don't spread bacteria from the anus.

The warning signs

The following symptoms may be a sign of infection:

- an unusually thick or watery, cloudy or smelly discharge from the vagina;
- itching, rashes, sores, blisters or pain in the genital area;
- a pain or burning sensation when you pass urine;
- urinating more often than usual; and
- pain during sex.

For more information, ask your doctor for the 'Thrush', and 'Cystitis' factsheets or call the National AIDS Helpline free on 0800 567 123.

Has **HIV** gone away?



HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the most serious sexually transmitted infection. It damages the body's defence system so that it cannot fight off certain infections. Most people who have HIV look and feel healthy for a long time, sometimes for 10 years or more. They may not know they have the virus. However, they can pass it on to other people through semen, blood and vaginal fluids.

When someone with HIV goes on to get certain illnesses, this condition is called AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). New treatments have been developed which mean that most people can stay well for longer although these don't suit everybody.

HIV can be passed on:

- if you have vaginal or anal sex without a condom with someone who has HIV, and unprotected oral sex also carries some risk;
- by a mother with HIV to her baby during pregnancy, at birth or through breastfeeding;
- by injecting drugs using needles, syringes or other equipment that is infected with HIV.

Where can I get **help**?



Where to go for help

If you have had sex without using a condom with someone who has an infection, you could get an infection, even if your partner has no symptoms. Don't wait for symptoms to appear.

If you think you've been at risk, ask your GP for a check-up or contact an NHS sexual health clinic, often called an STD (sexually transmitted disease), or GUM (genito-urinary medicine) clinic.

NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer free checks and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. Some offer women-only sessions. The service is strictly confidential.

You can go to any NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic, anywhere in the country. You don't have to use a local one and you don't have to be sent by your GP. (Sexual health clinics which are not run by the NHS do not always offer the full range of services you can get at NHS sexual health clinics.) You will not be tested for HIV without your consent.

If you don't seek treatment, the infection could get worse.

It's a good idea to have a check-up at an NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic if you have a new partner, or if either of you have more than one sexual partner.

What **risks** am I taking?



To make sex safer for you, you need to think carefully about the risks you face and take sensible steps to reduce them. These risks may change as your relationships and your lifestyle change.

Think about situations when the risks could be greater. For example:

- on holiday, take condoms with you - you never know when you might need them; and
- watch out for alcohol and drugs - they can change the way you behave and can affect the decisions you make about what is safe. You could end up doing something you regret later.

**Be realistic -
and plan ahead.**

Condom talk

Many of us find it difficult to suggest using a condom with our partner. But once you have decided to have sex, the earlier you discuss it, the less likely you are to get carried away and end up not using any protection.

Try to get round to talking about safer sex. You can then let your partner know what you think and see how they feel too. You could be pleasantly surprised. Your partner may find it just as difficult to talk about it and would welcome your lead.

Many women carry their own condoms. If you are prepared it doesn't mean you are planning to sleep around - it is a responsible thing to do and shows you take your sexual health seriously.

Sexual problems



Sexual problems are common and can upset you and your partner. Almost one in five people have them at some time in their lives.

Such problems include the following.

- Not wanting sex – which often affects women after pregnancy, but can also happen at other times.
- Vaginismus – a painful spasm of the vagina which can happen before or during sex.
- Difficulty reaching orgasm – which may happen if you are anxious and can't relax with your sexual partner. It often helps if you and your partner take time to find out what you like when you have sex.

Many of us find it hard to talk about these problems because they are so personal. But your doctor or an NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic will be able to help you. They may send you to a counsellor or a specialist doctor who is used to dealing with these problems. If you want, they will see you and your partner together.

Some NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer a counselling service within the clinic. Check with your local clinic to see what they offer.

Woman to woman



Information in this booklet about regular cervical smear tests and breast awareness is important for all women – gay, straight or bisexual.

Women can pass sexually transmitted infections to other women. Practising safer sex can help to prevent sexually transmitted infections (see page 14).

If you are worried about your sexuality, talking can help. Organisations such as the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard offer confidential help and advice on this and other sexual health issues, on 020 7837 7324.

Some NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer confidential services for women who have sex with women. Ring the National AIDS Helpline for details, on 0800 567 123.

I'd like to know **more**



You can get free, confidential treatment and advice at any family planning or NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic, or from your GP. You can find information about your nearest NHS sexual health clinic by phoning the National AIDS Helpline free on 0800 567 123, or phone your local hospital and ask for the GUM or 'special' clinic. Clinics will be listed in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD).

**You can find information about clinics on our sexual health website: www.lovelife.uk.com
NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer free HIV testing, and screening for other infections.**

Ask at your GP surgery if they have a well-woman clinic. For information on a wide range of women's health topics, you can contact the Women's Health Helpline on 0845 125 5254 (Monday to Friday 9.30am to 1.30pm) or look at the website: www.womenshealthlondon.org.uk

More information

We produce a range of leaflets and factsheets about sexual health and folic acid. You should be able to get them, free of charge, from health centres, clinics and chemists.

You can also order free copies of any sexual health leaflets by phoning the National AIDS Helpline, free, on 0800 567 123 or by contacting your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local health authority).

Contact numbers

Contraceptive Education Service 0845 310 1334

A confidential helpline that gives you information on contraception, sexual health and your local clinics.

Monday to Friday 9am to 7pm
website: www.fpa.org.uk

Relate 01788 573 241

A national counselling organisation which can put you in touch with their local branches. Relate offers confidential counselling to individuals and couples on relationships and sexual difficulties.

Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm.
website: www.relate.org.uk

Issue 01922 722 888

Advice, information and a guide to clinics if you are having infertility problems.

Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4pm.
website: www.issue.co.uk

British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) 08457 304030

Provides abortion services and after-abortion support, pregnancy testing, contraceptive advice and emergency contraception, sterilisation and vasectomy. Ring for an appointment at a consultation centre.

Monday to Friday 8am to 9pm,
Saturday 8.30am to 6pm.
Sunday 9.30am to 2.30pm
website: www.bpas.org

National AIDS Helpline (NAH) 0800 567 123

A 24-hour, seven-days-a-week, free and confidential telephone service with advice about HIV, AIDS, sexual health, local services, clinics and support services. Calls are free and confidential, and will not appear on your phone bill (this does not apply to calls made from some mobile phones – check with your mobile phone company for details).

National AIDS Helpline Language Line 0800 917 2227

This a multi-language line with an opening menu in Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, Gujarati, Arabic and Cantonese. You will be able to listen to messages in each language. From 6pm to 10 pm on the following days, you will be able to speak to an operator who is fluent in each language.

Monday – Bengali
Tuesday – Urdu
Wednesday – Arabic
Thursday – Gujarati
Friday – Hindi
Saturday – Punjabi
Sunday – Cantonese

You will need to listen out for your own language and select the appropriate number.

The **Welsh Language Service** is available on the main 0800 567 123 number every day between 11am and 11pm. The service is provided by a combination of Welsh-speaking advisers and Language Line.

A **minicom service** is available for people with hearing difficulties on **0800 521 361** 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard 020 7837 7324

A 24-hour, seven-days-a-week helpline that offers you a range of services including advice about your sexual health.

Terrence Higgins Trust Helpline 020 7242 1010

Open every day between 12 noon and 10pm. You can get information, advice, practical support and counselling on HIV and AIDS.
website: www.tht.org.uk

The law

The legal age of consent for sex between a man and a woman in England, Scotland and Wales is 16. In Northern Ireland it's 17.

The legal age of consent for anal sex between a man and a woman in England and Wales is 18. In Scotland it's 16. In Northern Ireland it's illegal.

The legal age of consent for anal sex between two men in the UK is 18, provided both men consent. A lower age of consent is currently being considered in Parliament.

There is no law on the age of consent for sex between two women. However, certain laws suggest that both women must consent and be over 16, except in Northern Ireland, where they must be over 17.

Contact a sexual health clinic or your doctor if you are worried or not sure about your sexual health.

This leaflet only gives basic information about sexual health. We have used information based on the evidence and medical opinion at the time of printing.

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