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Condom (Sheath)

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What are condoms?

A condom covers the erect penis during sex and stops sperm from entering the woman's vagina. Most male condoms are made from thin rubber (latex). About 2 in 100 people are allergic to latex. The newer plastic (polyurethane) condom is an alternative. Polyurethane condoms are also odour-free, thinner and more sensitive than latex condoms. However, they are more expensive.

How effective is the condom?

When no contraception is used, more than 80 out of 100 sexually active women become pregnant within one year.

About 2 women in 100 will become pregnant each year if condoms are used **perfectly** for contraception. This number comes from research and relies on people reporting their behaviour. Sometimes this may not be totally accurate, so it is difficult to be sure of a figure. Some problems can occur if the condom breaks, or slips during sex.

Nearer to 15 women in 100 will become pregnant with normal - not perfect - usage.

If condoms are used less carefully then they become less effective. Correct use means:

- Using a condom every time you have sex.
- Putting it on the penis before it touches the vaginal area.

- The penis should also not touch the woman's vaginal area after the condom is taken off.

It should also be mentioned that condoms are very effective at protecting people from catching sexually transmitted infections such as [HIV](#), [hepatitis](#) and [chlamydia](#).

What are the advantages of the condom?

Condoms are easy to buy and use and are free from medical risks. Other than people with latex allergy, condoms are safe for anybody to use. People with latex allergy can use other types of condoms.

Condoms can be very reliable if used carefully.

[They help to protect from sexually transmitted infections.](#)

[They may help to prevent cancer of the neck of the womb \(cervix\).](#)

What are the disadvantages of the male condom?

Some people feel sex has to be interrupted to put a condom on.

Some men feel that their penis is less sensitive with a condom on.

The condom may sometimes split. If it splits, there is a risk of pregnancy.

Condoms are less effective than other methods of contraception such as contraceptive pills or long-acting reversible methods. [See the separate leaflet called Contraception Methods for information about all the options.](#)

Where can I get condoms?

Condoms are widely available. In the UK they are free from family planning clinics. Some genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics also supply them free, as do some GP surgeries. They can be bought from pharmacies, supermarkets or online. They are also often available from vending machines in public toilets.

How do I use a condom?

Read the instructions on the packet carefully. The following is a general guide:

- Make sure the condom you use is of good quality (look for the British Standards Institute (BSI) kitemark and 'use by' date).
- Put the condom on the penis before any contact with the vagina.
- Use each condom only once.
- Pinch the teat end to get rid of air.
- Then roll the condom on to the erect penis.
- You should not use oil-based products – such as Vaseline®, body oils, or lotions – with latex condoms. They can damage latex and cause the condom to split. If you want to use a lubricant with a latex condom then use K-Y Jelly® or a spermicidal jelly. Any lubricant is fine with polyurethane condoms.
- After sex, withdraw the penis before it becomes too soft. Hold the condom on whilst doing so.
- Take care not to spill any semen when taking off the condom.
- If the condom splits or slips off, seek advice about emergency contraception within 72 hours.

Common errors when using a condom

These include the following:

- The penis may leak sperm before the man 'comes' (ejaculates). If there is any contact with the vaginal area before the condom is put on, the woman may become pregnant.
- The condom may also leak sperm when the penis is withdrawn.
- If you have had sex already there may be sperm still on the penis. If there is any contact with the vagina before a new condom is put on, the woman may become pregnant.

- Damage to the condom may cause the condom to split – for example, when handled by women with sharp fingernails.

Note: if any of the above happen then you should obtain emergency contraception within 72 hours. It is more effective the sooner it is taken after sexual intercourse.

See the separate leaflet called [Emergency Contraception](#) for more details.

Further reading

- [Trussell J](#); Contraceptive failure in the United States, *Contraception*, 2011
- [Barrier methods for contraception and STI prevention](#); Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (August 2012 – updated October 2015)
- [Contraception – barrier methods and spermicides](#); NICE CKS, April 2016 (UK access only)
- [Stover J, Rosen JE, Carvalho MN, et al](#); The case for investing in the male condom. *PLoS One*. 2017 May 16;12(5):e0177108. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0177108. eCollection 2017.

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Originally Published: 19/11/2023	Next review date: 26/11/2018	Document ID: doc_4223

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