

# 10 Things to Know Before You Get in Bed

By Amy Levine, M.A.

## 1. Annual visits to the doctor are important for your sexual health.

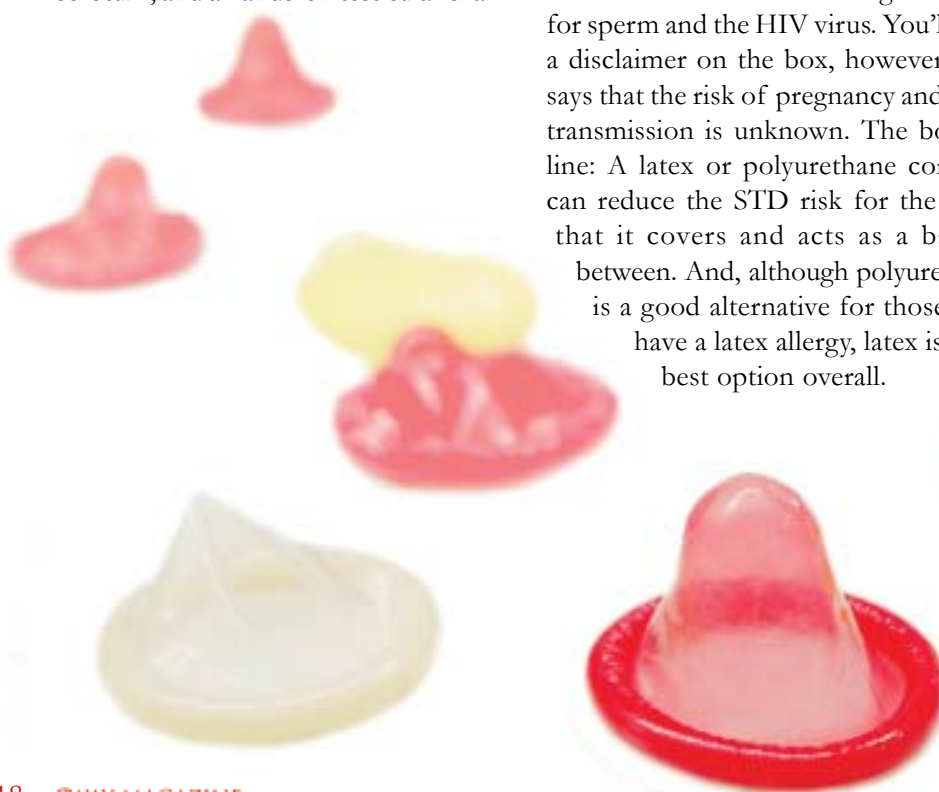
After the age of 18, women should see their gynecologists every year. The main reason: to get a Pap test. The test screens for changes in the cells of the cervix—often caused by sexually transmitted strains of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV)—that are detected by swabbing the surface and sending it to a lab for analysis. Usually, the exam also includes a breast exam, a visual examination of the vulva (the external genital area), checking the vagina and internal organs (particularly the uterus and ovaries), checking the anal tissue, and a general physical exam.

Guys can visit their general practitioner or a urologist for an overall physical that usually includes blood work, a visual examination of the penis and scrotum, and a hands-on testicular exam.



## 2. Lambskin, latex, and polyurethane condoms don't offer the same amount of protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

All three materials protect against pregnancy when the condom is used consistently and correctly. However, lambskin condoms don't offer *any* STD protection because they have microscopic pores too small for sperm to permeate, but large enough for STDs to travel through. Polyurethane is approved by the Food and Drug Administration and proven to be comparable to latex condoms in creating a barrier for sperm and the HIV virus. You'll read a disclaimer on the box, however, that says that the risk of pregnancy and STD transmission is unknown. The bottom line: A latex or polyurethane condom can reduce the STD risk for the areas that it covers and acts as a barrier between. And, although polyurethane is a good alternative for those who have a latex allergy, latex is the best option overall.



## 3. Prevent your condoms from bursting.

It's incredibly rare for a condom to break if it's used correctly.

Here are some tips to make the male condom most effective:

- Check the expiration date and be sure the wrapper or condom isn't damaged, discolored, or brittle.
- Open the package carefully so you don't rip the condom.
- Hold the condom so the tip points through the ring and rolls down easily (if you try to put it on the "wrong" way, and it touches the penis before you realize it, throw it out and grab a new one).
- If the penis isn't circumcised, pull back the foreskin.
- Place the rolled condom on the head of the penis.
- Leave a half-inch space at the top to collect semen. Then, pinch the air out of the tip with one hand as you unroll the condom over the penis with the other hand as far as possible toward the base of the shaft. Next, smooth out any bubbles by pushing them out the open end.
- Lubricate the outside of the condom to slip inside easier and increase pleasure.

Use only water- or silicone-based lubes with latex condoms (that means *no* baby oil, body lotion, massage oils, or other kinky finds or food products), or else the prophylactic will likely deteriorate and ultimately break.

Polyurethane can be used with water-, silicone-, or oil-based lubes.

- After ejaculation, pull out (of the vagina, anus, or mouth) while still

erect, holding the condom at the base to prevent semen from spilling.

- Wipe any remaining ejaculate off the penis.
- Never double-up on condoms, as the friction of rubbing together can cause slippage and breakage. Be sure to use a new one every time you do the deed.

#### 4. Don't assume that an STD screening tests for all STDs.

If you are or have been sexually active, it's important to get tested for STDs. Though most people think their doctor routinely tests for STDs, the reality is that they don't. The most common STDs that can only be treated, not cured, are: HPV (approximately 20 million people are currently infected and at least 50 percent of sexually active men and women acquire genital HPV infection at some point in their lives<sup>1</sup>), herpes (one out of five adolescents and adults have had genital herpes infection<sup>2</sup>), and HIV (globally, about 50 percent of all new infections are among people aged 15 to 24).<sup>3</sup> Bacterial infections that can be cured if caught soon after being contracted include chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. So, request to be tested for all diseases by name. The caveat: Not all STDs can be diagnosed through a test. Guys, for example, can't be tested for HPV unless a wart is present on the skin and visually identified.

#### 5. Emergency contraception can reduce the chance of pregnancy.

If your contraception failed or you had unprotected sex and are concerned about pregnancy, consider taking emergency

contraceptive pills. These pills are concentrated doses of the hormones that are in regular birth-control pills. Depending on where a woman is in her menstrual cycle, emergency contraception (EC) can work in one of a few ways, including: stopping or delaying an ovary from releasing an ovum (egg) during ovulation; disrupting the journey of the egg or sperm; interfering with fertilization; altering the lining of the uterus such that a fertilized egg cannot implant. Though studies show that EC should work when the first dose is taken within 120 hours after intercourse, effectiveness increases when the first pills are popped

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within 24 hours. Just realize that the high amounts of hormones in these risk-reducing pills have temporary side effects such as nausea, vomiting, and dizziness.

#### 6. HIV and other STDs can be transmitted during oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Rubbing below-the-belt areas against each other when you're naked is also a risk.

An estimated 19 million new infections occur each year in the United States, almost half of them among young people aged 15 to 24.<sup>4</sup> Unless you know that you and your partner are STD-free and mutually monogamous, reduce your risk by using a latex or polyurethane condom before any genital contact. Though it may be awkward at first, use a condom or dental dam (a sheath, placed over the vulva or anal opening,

that can be purchased at sex shops or online sex-toy stores) during oral action.

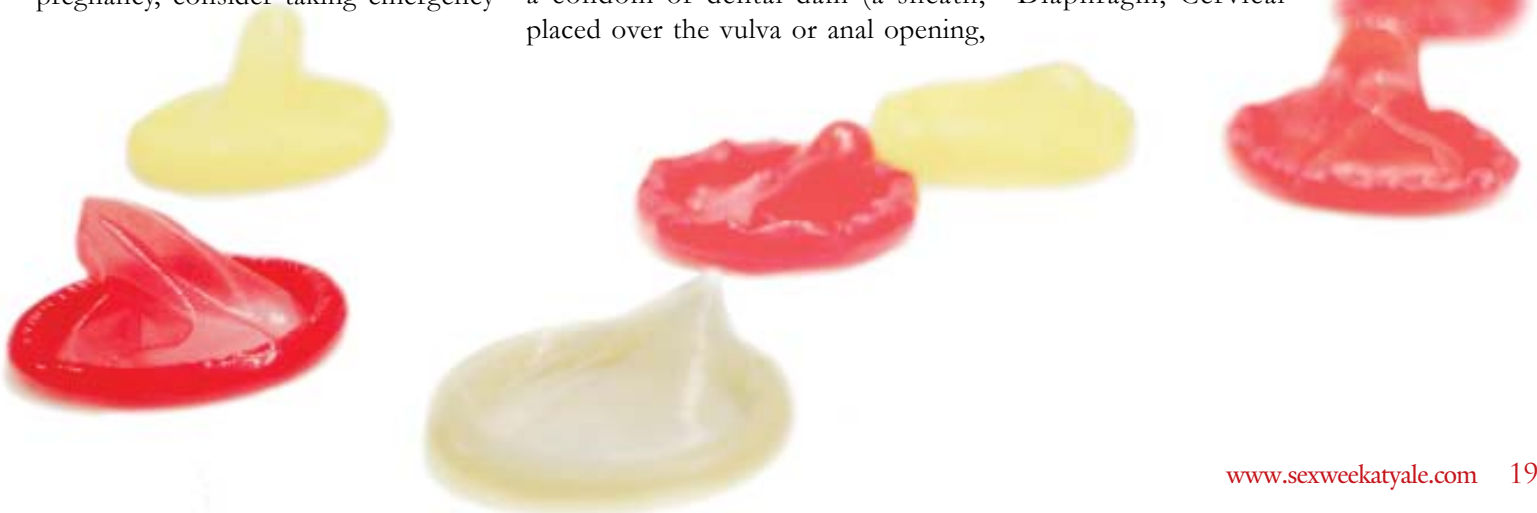
#### 7. It's possible to get genital herpes if your partner has a cold sore or fever blister, and vice versa.

There are two types of herpes viruses: HSV-1, which usually causes oral herpes, and HSV-2, which generally causes genital herpes. But, the tricky fact about this disease is that it's possible to get HSV-1 on the genital area and HSV-2 on the mouth; all it takes for transmission is direct skin-to-skin contact with the virus. Herpes is very common since most people have the antibody in their blood stream. Some people get outbreaks rather often; others might have only had one obvious infection, and yet there are also people that are unaware that they

have been infected because they never had any symptoms. Though it's believed that herpes can be contracted whether or not symptoms are present, try not to live in fear. Reduce the risk and avoid physical contact if you or your partner knows that an outbreak is coming on; when a herpes sore, blister, or cut is present; and until the infected area is fully healed.

#### 8. "Just for a minute" may feel good in the heat of the moment, but it should be skipped.

Unprotected sex can be risky. Maybe you're not concerned about pregnancy because you're using hormonal contraceptives (such as birth-control pills, Depo-Provera, NuvaRing, or the Ortho Evra Patch), a barrier method (including a



Cap, Lea's Shield, or the Today Sponge), or an IUD. What you might not realize, however, is that these methods don't reduce the possibility of STD transmission (from skin-to-skin contact, vaginal fluid, pre-ejaculatory fluid, and semen) if you or your partner is infected. So, be sure to use a new latex or polyurethane condom correctly, from start to finish, every time you have sex.

### 9. Before you get tested for STDs, time needs to pass after your last risky encounter for the test to be accurate.

Freaking out that you might have been exposed to an STD after your hot and heavy hook-up? Though some STDs can be diagnosed within a week, others require that you wait for window periods to elapse before you can find out if you've been infected. For example, HIV can take at least three months after exposure for antibodies to be detected.

### 10. Women can get pregnant if they have unprotected sex during their period.

The number of days in a female's menstrual cycle can vary from month to month. It can therefore be difficult to know when she'll ovulate. And since stress, eating habits, exercise, and other factors can all affect a cycle, it's possible to ovulate while menstruating or soon after. Since sperm can live for five to seven days inside her body, if an egg is released when his sperm are alive and swimming inside her reproductive tract, a pregnancy can occur. **S**

## Credible Sources for More Sexuality Information:

### \*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)\*

[www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/personal\\_Health\\_Questions.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/personal_Health_Questions.htm)

Provides fact sheets about common sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Also operates the CDC-INFO Contact Center (800-CDC-INFO) that provides STD information and testing sites.

### \*The Emergency Contraception Website\*

[www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com)

Provides answers to over 40 questions related to Emergency Contraception (EC). Also offers a search feature to find a provider to obtain EC.

### \*Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG)\*

[www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

Provides support to help both family and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people, and GLBT people themselves.

### \*Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA)\*

[www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)

Provides information about sexuality and sexual health, as well as nationwide health center contact information.

### \*Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)\*

[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

Operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800-656-HOPE) that provides free, confidential calling.

### D.I.Y. Dental Dam:

If you don't have a dental dam within reach, you can easily make one from a non-lubricated condom. Take a condom out of the package, unroll it completely, and cut off each end (the tip and the rim) with scissors. Carefully place one of the blades of the scissor in the tubular shape and cut from one open end to the other. When you're done, you'll have a square or rectangular sheath to put in place before the first lick.

## Citations:

- 1 Genital HPV Infection – CDC Fact Sheet.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm>
- 2 Genital Herpes – CDC Fact Sheet.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/Herpes/STDFact-Herpes.htm>
- 3 UNAIDS.  
[http://www.unaids.org/epi2005/doc/docs/en/Epi\\_bgdr\\_methodology\\_Nov05.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/epi2005/doc/docs/en/Epi_bgdr_methodology_Nov05.pdf)
- 4 Trends in Reportable Sexually Transmitted Diseases in the United States, 2004.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/trends2004.htm>

## About the Author

**Amy Levine, M.A.** has worked as a sexuality educator for more than 10 years. She has her Master's Degree in Human Sexuality and is certified by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT). Amy is also the online sex columnist for Cosmopolitan Magazine. Check out her weekly "Carnal Counselor" column at [www.cosmopolitan.com](http://www.cosmopolitan.com).