

COSMOPOLITAN

EXPERTS

sex advice

from Amy Levine, Cosmo's Carnal Counselor

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"What's the best kind of condom to use?"

Q My boyfriend and I have recently decided that we will use condoms for birth control. Can you tell me the difference between lambskin, latex and polyurethane, and which is best for us to choose?

A When used correctly and every time you have sex, condoms will help reduce the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but they're not all created equal. Latex condoms, a.k.a. rubbers, are the most effective at preventing pregnancy and STDs. Made from the sap from rubber trees, they come in an array of sizes and textures, and are the least expensive of the three. However, they can be used only with water-based lube. Other products, such as baby oil, body lotion and petroleum jelly, can cause them to deteriorate. In addition, some people may have allergic reactions to latex, which can cause itching, burning or breaking out in a rash.

Polyurethane condoms are recommended for those who are allergic to latex. Made from a synthetic plastic, polyurethane is colorless and odorless, and thinner, stronger, less elastic and roomier than latex. Polyurethane condoms can also be used with water- and oil-based lube. And while you'll likely hear a crinkling noise with each thrust, the material generates heat, which may enhance sensitivity. Polyurethane is not porous, so it provides STD and pregnancy protection. But, there is no hard data to back it up, so the box has a disclaimer -- basically, to cover the manufacturers' asses -- that the risk of pregnancy and STD transmission is not known.

Lambskin condoms are made from the intestinal lining of a lamb, so they feel the most natural. They too are compatible with water- and oil-based lube. The downside? Though the pores in lambskin are small enough to prevent sperm from passing through, they won't block most STDs like HIV, herpes and hepatitis B. So they should be used only if you and your guy are monogamous and STD-free.

A few more pregnancy prevention pointers with condom use: Avoid any that aren't clearly labeled "latex," "lambskin" or "polyurethane" -- those are often intended for gag gifts, not birth control. To avoid breakage, use only one condom at a time and make sure it's lubricated

throughout the session. Some prelubed condoms are labeled "spermicidally lubricated," which means they're coated with the spermicide Nonoxynol-9; if you're allergic to N-9, use condoms that are labeled "lubricated." However, even if you use a spermicidally lubed condom, the amount of N-9 is too small to significantly lower the risk of pregnancy. So, if you want extra protection and aren't allergic to N-9, use vaginal contraceptive film or a spermicidal jelly, foam or gel with the condom.

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