



CONDOMS

The Issue

Increased use of condoms would greatly reduce unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Background

A condom protects by providing a barrier between a man's penis and his partner. A male condom covers the penis, while a female condom is a liner worn in the vagina. Condoms are made of different materials, and are available in a variety of sizes, shapes, colours and textures. They are sold in grocery stores, pharmacies, discount stores and vending machines. When used properly, condoms have a leakage rate of under one percent and a breakage rate of about one percent.

Types of Condoms

There are a variety of condoms available for both men and women, each of which has advantages and disadvantages.

Male Condoms

Natural rubber latex condoms, which have been available for years, are the most common and popular. They are now labelled with a size to give a better fit. The larger the width, the larger the size. If a condom is too large, it can slip off; and if it is too tight, the condom is more likely to break.

"Natural membrane," or "sheepskin," condoms are made from the intestinal lining of sheep. This is the oldest type of condom still being used today, but these products are specialty items and are not used by many. The natural membrane is somewhat porous, and is therefore not recommended for protection against certain viral diseases such as hepatitis and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). This type does, however, protect

against pregnancy and bacterial STIs. Some users find these condoms to be more comfortable than those made of latex.

Synthetic polymer condoms, usually made of polyurethane, are similar to latex and are as effective in preventing pregnancy and STIs. This type of condom is a good option for people who are allergic to latex, and can also be used with lubricants that would destroy latex. Some users find them more comfortable than latex condoms, but they are usually more expensive.

Spermicidally lubricated condoms are coated with a lubricant containing nonoxynol-9 (N-9), which may provide added protection against pregnancy. However, N-9 does not effectively protect against infection from HIV or other STIs. In fact, N-9 may even increase the risk of infection by irritating the tissue inside the vagina or rectum, making it easier for the infection to be transmitted. Nevertheless, for the prevention of STIs, including HIV, a condom lubricated with N-9 is better than no condom at all. Condoms lubricated with N-9 should be used only when the extra pregnancy protection is important. They should not be used for anal sex, nor when an additional birth control method, such as the pill, is already being used.

Female Condoms

Female condoms are usually made of polyurethane or latex and are as effective against pregnancy and disease as male condoms. They are relatively new and are more expensive than male condoms. Many women who use them like the fact that they are the ones to decide when to use a condom, and appreciate the assurance that they are protecting themselves.

Novelty Items

Novelty items are similar to condoms and are sold through vending machines or in specialty stores. Novelty items should not be confused with condoms.



- Both may be sold in the same place. However novelty items cannot be sold for the prevention of disease or pregnancy.
- Even when used with a latex condom, they may not protect against disease because some contain materials which will damage a latex condom.

Health Effects of Condoms

Used properly, condoms can greatly reduce the risk of pregnancy and STIs. By using them, you protect yourself and your partner and help prevent the spread of disease. However, as noted above, they are not foolproof. In about 10 percent of cases, a pregnancy can result, usually because of improper usage.

Minimizing Your Risk

Follow these tips to receive maximum protection.

- Male condoms are available in three and twelve packs. Try several brands of condoms in the three pack until you find ones that are best for you.
- Always use condoms according to the directions on the package.
- Do not use a condom after the manufacturer's expiry date printed on the package.
- You may use lubrication but be aware that petroleum or oil-based lubricants, such as petroleum jelly, weaken condoms made of latex.
- Oil-based lubricants may be used with some synthetic condoms.
- Lubricants are usually found next to the condoms in stores. Read the instructions on the package carefully.

- Some vaginal preparations, such as those containing estrogens, should not be used with latex condoms because they may also weaken the condom.
- If you find a condom is broken after use, reduce the risk of pregnancy by applying a spermicide immediately.
- If you are using a contraceptive method, such as the pill or intrauterine device, remember that these offer no protection against getting STIs and HIV.
- Store latex condoms at room temperature, out of direct sunlight, as heat shortens their shelf life.
- Report any complaints about condoms to the Health Products and Food Branch in your region, listed in the blue pages (Government of Canada) of the telephone directory. You can also report problems through the toll-free Medical Devices Hot-Line at 1-800-267-9675.

Health Canada's Role

In Canada, condoms are considered medical devices and are therefore regulated by Health Canada. These regulations outline the conditions that condom manufacturers and importers must meet. Strict standards are set for latex condoms regarding tests for strength and leakage. Condoms made from other materials must be evaluated before being marketed to prove that they are effective against disease and sperm. The regulations also include packaging, labelling and other quality measures. Health Canada also maintains a database of medical devices listing condom brands licenced for sale in Canada.

Need more info?

Consult your doctor or pharmacist for more information.

Most condom manufacturers also offer information on their products.

For Population Reports, go to:
<http://www.inforforhealth.org/pr/online.shtml#h>

Public Health Agency of Canada - STIs Web site at:
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/std-mts/index.html>

Public Health Agency of Canada - EpiUpdate 2005, Section 16

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/epiu-aepi/epi-05/pdf/epi_05_e.pdf

Health Canada medical devices regulation
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/md-im/index_e.html

Health Canada standards on condoms, item 24 : http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/md-im/applic-demande/pol/standards_normes_pol_e.html

Health Canada's database of licenced medical devices
<http://www.mdall.ca>

Health Products and Food Branch in your region
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/branch-dirgen/hpfb-dgpsa/hpfi-ipsa/index_e.html

Some Condom manufacturers' sites:
<http://www.safesense.com/manufacturers.shtml>

For additional articles on this subject and other issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*