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**Safer
vaginal
sex**

A guide to making vaginal sex
safer!



A note about this booklet

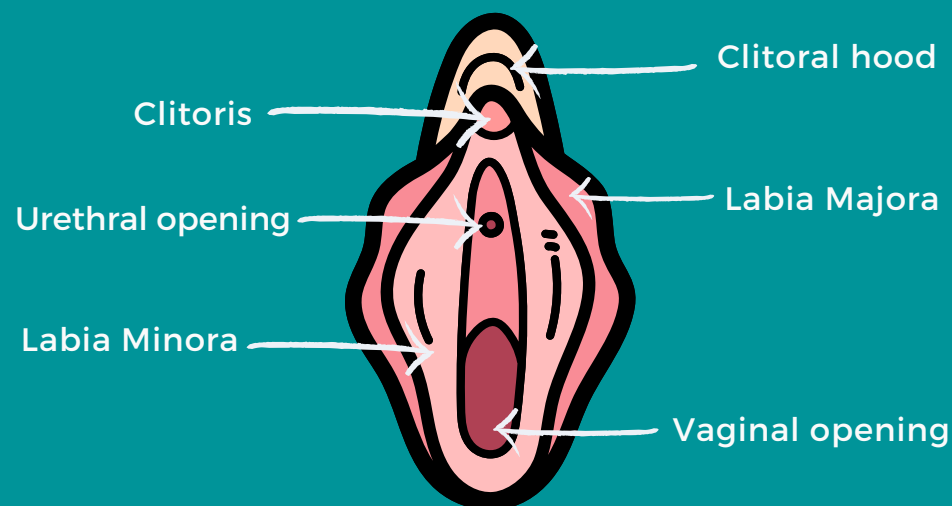
This booklet is for all people with a vulva or vagina regardless of sexuality or gender identity. There may be parts of the booklet that won't apply to you, but we are sure there will be parts that will.

All vulvas look different

Vulvas come in different shapes, sizes, and colors. Many people worry that their genitalia doesn't look "normal," but there is no normal. The only normal out there is what's normal for you, unless your normal involves pain or discomfort, everything is likely fine. If you do experience pain or discomfort then you should contact your GP.

Do you know your Vulva?

The vulva is the correct name for the external parts of the female genitalia. This includes the glans, clitoris, labia minora and majora, opening of the urethra and vagina (the introitus), and the surrounding tissue.



What is a vagina?

The vagina is the tube between the vulva and the cervix. The vagina is what babies exit through during birth, and where menstrual blood exits during your period. The vagina is also used for insertion, such as with a penis, fingers, hands, female condoms, sex toys, tampons, or menstrual cups.



Getting to know your Vulva

Before we go any further, we just want to remind you that masturbation is perfectly normal. It's actually a good way to explore and get to know your body. It may also help you communicate your sexual likes and dislikes to a partner.



Masturbation can be done solo (on your own) or with mutual masturbation (with someone else).

Whilst some people use their hands and fingers, some prefer to rub or insert objects such as sex toys.

Don't forget to keep your nails short!

It's best to keep nails short and free from nail polish when inserting them into the vagina; long nails could cut the delicate vaginal tissue and nail polish could flake off.

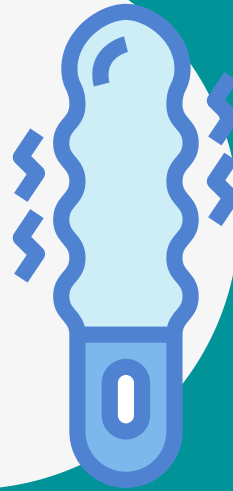


Remember

Personal hygiene is very important; you need to wash your hands before and after masturbation. It may also help to wear gloves.



Masturbation is normal!



If you're using sex toys with your partner(s), condoms can help you reduce the risk of passing on Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). Make sure you use a new condom for each partner and if you are inserting the toy into different orifices, you will need to use a new condom for that too. You should always clean your sex toys before and after each use, paying special attention to areas where two materials or parts of the toy meet (like around buttons or battery compartments).

The big

Masturbating can lead to an orgasm, but you don't have to orgasm; not everyone can or wants to. Masturbation is different for everyone and what feels nice one time may not be on other occasions, it's all about you learning what is right for you. There's no right or wrong way to masturbate.

Don't forget the lube!

You may find using a water-based lubricant helps reduce friction and injury. You can order it free from www.getiton.org.uk

What is vaginal sex ?

Vaginal sex isn't just about penis penetration, it can include inserting fingers, hands or sex toys and licking the vagina, clitoris, and inner and outer labia.

Is vaginal sex safe?

Like any sexual activity, vaginal sex comes with some health risks. The most common ones are Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

You can take precautions to reduce these risks and ensure you can enjoy vaginal sex safely.

- Always use a condom if you are having penetrative sex with a penis
- Use lots of condom-safe lubrication
- Use a dental dam to kiss or lick someone's vagina
- Change condoms before switching to oral or anal sex
- Use a fresh condom if sharing sex toys
- Wash hands thoroughly before touching the face or genitals
- Get checked for STIs before you have sex



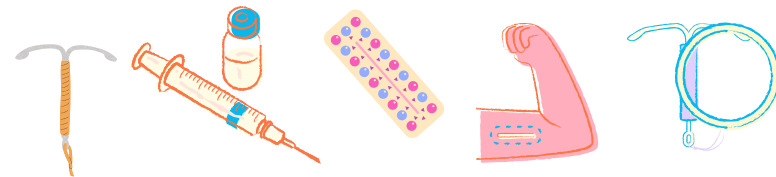
Things to think about?

Having vaginal sex without using a condom can put you and your partner at risk of unplanned pregnancy as well as STIs.



Don't want to get pregnant?

If the type of sex you are having could result in a pregnancy and you don't want it to, it's worth thinking about contraception. When it comes to contraception, you have lots to choose from. Why not visit www.getiton.org.uk to find out more about the different options and find one that is right for you?



Taking testosterone?

If you are taking testosterone, you should avoid contraceptives containing oestrogen as this can reduce testosterone's effectiveness. If you are taking testosterone, your pregnancy risk is reduced but not gone, so it is still important to use a method of contraception. Talk to your nurse or doctor who can help you find the best one for you!

Talk and then talk again!

Sex should be fun and enjoyable for all parties. If you know what you enjoy and you can communicate this with your partner(s) and in turn, they can communicate this with you. Having these discussions before sex is not only an important part of the discussion when it comes to consent but helps you have a healthy sex life and most importantly you will then have the sex you enjoy.



Things to think about when it comes to sex:

- Do you or don't like penetration?
- Do you like to explore if you're into sex toys
- What types of sex do you both enjoy? Oral sex or you want to try mutual masturbation etc

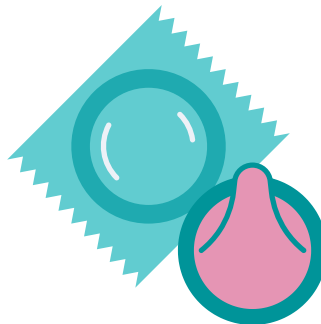
Understand Consent!

Communication is the key to healthy sex life, as it lets your partner(s) know that you are enjoying it and that you consent. Sexual consent should always be an enthusiastic yes!



Both you and your partner(s) can say no or stop sex at any time, even after sex has started.

It is also possible to consent to certain types of sex but not others, for example wanting to have vaginal sex but not anal. If your partner(s) says no at any point, you should respect their boundaries.



If you and your partner(s) agreed to use condoms and then it is removed without their or your knowledge. This is not consensual sex!

Don't be a douche!

Your vagina is self-cleaning and douching can lead to vaginal dryness, irritation, and infections like Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) and Thrush. The most you need to do to keep yourself clean is to use mild, unscented soap around your labia when you bathe.

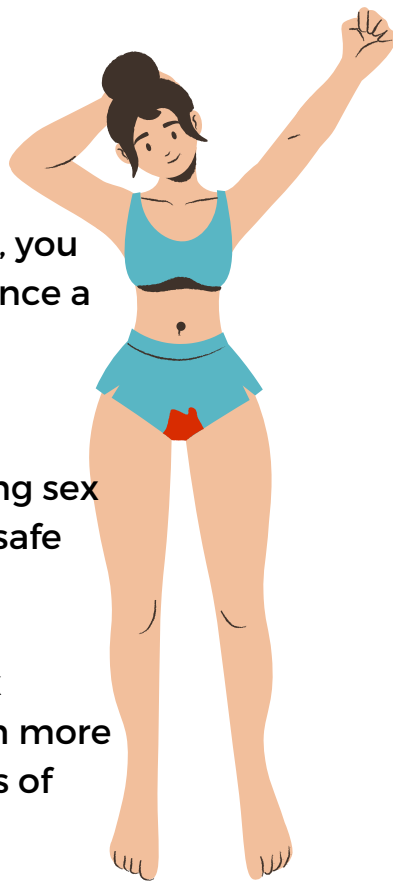


However, if you have had a vaginoplasty you may need to douche to keep your vagina clean. This will be different for everyone so it is important to talk to your surgeon about how to keep your vagina clean.

Sex on a period

During your reproductive years, you will have your period roughly once a month. Unless you aren't comfortable with the idea or it causes you discomfort or pain, there's no reason to avoid having sex during your period. It's usually safe for both partners.

Some people report having sex during their period can be even more pleasurable than at other times of the month.



Is it safe to have sex on a period?

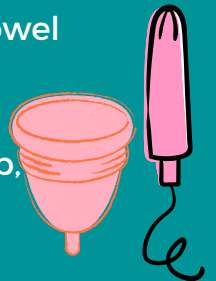


Yes, remember to always practice safe sex as you can still get pregnant and contract STIs if you have sex during your period. As long as you are taking the usual precautions, period sex is safe.

Things to think about.

It can be messy. There's always a chance that blood will get on you, your partner, and the sheets, especially if you have a heavy flow. What's more, you might find yourself worrying about making a mess, and this can take some of the fun out of sex. You could place a sheet or a towel underneath you to help with the mess.

If you are wearing a tampon or menstrual cup, take it out beforehand.



Remember consent, and make sure your partner knows you are having a period.

REMEMBER

It's best to be prepared, so have wet wipes nearby to help with the cleaning of any surfaces, and remember to wash your hands afterwards.



Menopause and sex

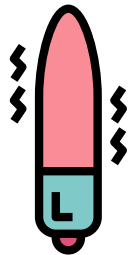
In the years around menopause, you may experience changes in your sex life. Some people say they enjoy sex more, whilst others find that they don't enjoy it as much. Low hormone levels after menopause cause vaginal tissues to be thinner and this can make sex uncomfortable. Talk to your doctor or nurse about ways to help, such as treatments to relieve vaginal dryness. Lube and Vaginal moisturisers are products that can help which you can buy over the counter.

Lube may help!

Lubricants are products designed to improve sex by reducing friction. Water-based are lubricants less likely to cause irritation and won't damage condoms. These can be put in and around the vagina, or onto a sex toy or penis before sex. If your symptoms persist, you should talk to a doctor or nurse who can prescribe other products that can help with the symptoms that menopause can cause. You can order free water-based lubricant from our website.

Sex toys

If you're finding penetration painful or uncomfortable, a small sex toy, or one that focuses on external stimulation might really help. This may help to increase your sex drive and create more intimacy between you and your partner.



Keep talking

Try to be honest and open about your symptoms, how you're feeling about your body, and the idea of having sex. Let your partner know if there are certain things you want to try, or if there are things you no longer find enjoyable. Communication is key to a healthy relationship. Some possible topics to discuss include:

- What feels good and what doesn't
- Which positions are more comfortable
- Whether you need more time to get aroused than before
- Ways to enjoy physical connection other than vaginal intercourse, such as oral sex or massage

Sexual Health

You still need to use condoms after menopause if you or your partner have sex with other people. It is also useful to consider annual sexual health testing if you are in a monogamous relationship and not using a condom.

After menopause, you may be more likely to get an STI from sex without a condom. Vaginal dryness or irritation is more common after menopause. This can cause small cuts or tears during sex, making you more likely to get an STI.



Condoms

Using a condom is the most effective way to stop you and your partners(s) from transmitting STIs. Remember a few things may reduce the effectiveness of condoms

The penis touches the anus before a condom is put on
Small amounts of semen can be excreted before ejaculation

The condom splits or slips off
This can happen if the wrong size is used or not put on correctly

The condom is damaged
This could be by using oil based lubricants, sharp fingernails or teeth

Using too much or too little lubricant
Using the right amount of lube could reduce the risk of friction

What if the condom breaks?

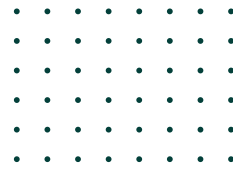
Condoms must be used correctly to make them effective. If not used correctly, condoms can rip, fall off or even burst during sex. If a condom breaks and there is a risk of pregnancy, you will need to access Emergency contraception. You can visit a pharmacy or call the clinic but remember that you only have up to 120 hours to access Emergency contraception.



If you feel there are concerns about HIV, call the clinic as soon as possible or A&E if we are closed. Medication (PEP) can be offered up to 3 days after sex to help prevent the transmission of HIV.



Safer sex can be sexy!



Free condoms are available at the sexual health clinic in St. Helens. You can also have condoms delivered directly to your door in the post. The choice is yours!

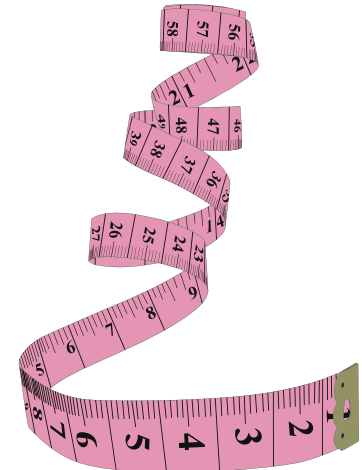
Just scan the code below to visit our website.



Gloves and dams are also available upon request, visit our website for more information

It's important to make sure the condom fits; if it's too small it can break, if it's too large it may come off during sex. This is also important if you are using condoms for sex toys. If you need a different size, please speak to a member of our staff.

If you or your partner has an allergy to latex, we offer **Latex-free condoms**.



Dental dams for oral sex

You may want to consider using a dental dam for oral sex on a vulva or anus. Dental dams are small, thin, square pieces of latex that are used during oral sex involving contact between the mouth and the vulva, or the mouth and the anus.



Dental dams might offer some protection from STIs, but there is currently little research to verify this.

You can request dental dams by speaking to a nurse or emailing condomorders@sthk.nhs.uk

Let's talk about PEP!

PEP stands for Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (sometimes called PEPSE). It is a medication that a person takes after sex to help reduce the risk of HIV taking hold of a person. It's meant as an emergency measure and only to be used as a last resort, such as if a condom fails during sex.



You must access PEP within 72 hours of exposure. If you have put yourself at risk of HIV call clinic. If it is out of hours visit A&E

Are you PrEP-erd?

Another way to reduce your risk of HIV is to consider Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). If you're HIV-negative, you may be able to take PrEP medicine to reduce your risk of getting the virus.

PrEP is available for some people who are at high risk of HIV infection - for example, those whose partner is HIV positive.

How do I get PrEP?

If you think you need PrEP, you need to contact the clinic. A nurse will assess your suitability for PrEP and if they think you would benefit from it, you will be given an appointment with a Doctor. Once you are on PrEP, you will attend the clinic regularly for blood tests to ensure you remain healthy while taking PrEP.

How often do you need to take PrEP?

Taking PrEP can be different for everyone. There are two types of methods, "event-based" and "daily dosing". If you have female reproductive organs you will need to take it daily.

You can stop taking PrEP if you stop having sex and you're risk of getting HIV has gone away.

Staying sexually healthy

Testing for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) is an important way to stay sexually healthy. You should get a test if:

- You think you might have symptoms of an STI
- You had sex without using a condom, including vaginal, oral and anal sex
- The condom split or came off during sex
- You are at the beginning of a new sexual relationship
- You or your partner have more than one sexual partner
- You shared injecting equipment

How often you need a check-up depends on your lifestyle and your sexual activity.

We recommend a full check-up for STIs annually or at the change of every partner, even if you don't believe you have put yourself at risk.

If you are a sex worker you may want to consider testing every 3 months.



I need a test?

We operate a telephone triage service at St Helen's clinic. To book an appointment, call 01744 646 473. You will be given a telephone assessment and if you need to attend the clinic, the nurse will arrange a suitable time for you to visit.

You can also request an online testing kit by visiting getiton.org.uk

What will you test for?

Everyone who visits our clinic is offered the following tests :

A blood test to check for HIV, Hepatitis B, C and Syphilis. A sample of blood is taken from your arm, this is the most convenient and accurate way of testing for these infections. However, we understand that sometimes people are afraid of needles, whilst we will try our best to help you overcome this fear, we can offer alternatives such as a finger prick test.



A collected swab to test for Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea. If you had anal sex or oral sex, you will also be offered a swab for these areas too.

If you have given us permission to text you, you will receive all your negative results by text message. If you test positive for an infection or we need you to repeat a test due to an error in processing, we will give you a call.

Results



On average, it can take up to two weeks to receive your results, however, on occasion it may take longer. You do not need to call us if you are still within the two week period for result processing.

It is important that you inform the team of any change of address or contact details after you have taken a test.

Accessing and Tracking Your Test Results online following online testing.

If you have completed online testing, you will receive your results online, and will be notified via the method you chosen when registering. Each time you start an online consultation we ask you to confirm your details as it is important you keep these up to date.

What happens if I test positive for an STI?

- Your nurse or doctor will give you advice about the particular treatment and STI you have tested positive for and they will explain what you should and shouldn't do following the treatment.
- Make sure whomever you have had sexual contact with is checked out and cleared of infection before having sex with you or anyone else.
- Avoid sex until the STI has been successfully treated. It is recommended to be re-tested 6 weeks after treatment to ensure the medication has worked.
- Always use a condom every time you have sex.

IMPORTANT

If you are given antibiotics, it is important to complete the course as directed, even if you start to feel better.

Telling your sexual partners?

The process of informing a sexual partner is known as Partner Notification. You may choose to tell your partners yourself, or you may ask us to help you. We can notify your sexual partners on your behalf about the risk of infection. This is called 'Provider Referral' and is done confidentially so we will not mention your name, location, or when the sex took place.

Provider Referrals are useful if there was a difficult break up for example. Notifying partners about an infection can feel daunting, but it also shows care and respect for the other person. In the majority of cases, sexual partners are grateful to have been informed, it will prompt them to have a check-up, and get treatment if it is indicated.



Useful contact & Info



St Helens Sexual Health Service
01744 646 473



www.sexualhealthsthelens.nhs.uk



NHS 111



For access to PEP when we are closed
visit A&E