

understanding sex and sexual health

Sexual relationships are a normal part of life. It's important to feel in control and make the decisions that are right for you to make sure that your sexual relationships are positive and healthy.

Am I ready for sex?

If you're thinking about having sex you probably feel nervous and excited. Even if it's not your first time it's normal to experience these emotions.

It's important that you feel confident and ready, so it might be helpful to ask yourself these questions:

- am I doing this because I want to?
- do I feel safe?
- do I feel comfortable talking about sex and contraception?
- do I feel comfortable having sex with someone sober?
- do I know how to have sex safely?
- what is the law about sex in my state?

What is sexual health?

Good sexual health requires a respectful and positive attitude around the decisions you make. It's also about having the right information so you can enjoy yourself and prevent things like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies. Sexual health is something that we all need to think and talk about, regardless of gender or sexuality.

What is sexuality?

Sexuality is an important part of who we are, what we feel and how we respond to others. It's about how we feel sexual pleasure and who we're attracted to. Everyone has different preferences and this is completely natural and normal.

A person may identify as:

- gay
- lesbian
- straight
- bisexual
- heterosexual
- pansexual
- queer
- asexual
- something else (or not yet sure).

What is consent?

Sexual consent is a verbal, physical and emotional agreement to engage in sexual activity. It happens without manipulation or threats and involves paying attention to what a partner is saying, their body language and their facial expressions.

It's important to be clear about consent, because any non-consensual activity is harmful and against the law – even kissing and touching. Don't ever pressure anyone to do something if they're not sure.

What to consider about consent

- sexual consent must be explicit and enthusiastic
- it's OK to stop, slow down or put things on hold
- you can always change your mind
- keep checking in with each other
- speak up and say how you're feeling
- alcohol and other drugs affect consent.



If you engage in any sexual activity with someone who is unable to give consent, it is sexual assault or rape.

What are sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

STIs get passed on during sexual contact, like kissing and touching (oral, anal and vaginal), through blood, saliva, semen or vaginal fluids. While medical treatment can cure some STIs, it may only help relieve symptoms for others – and not all types are curable.

Some STIs include:

- chlamydia
- gonorrhoea
- herpes/cold sores
- genital warts
- hepatitis
- HIV.

Some symptoms of STIs include:

- unusual discharge
- pain during urination/sex
- sores, blisters, ulcers, warts or rashes
- pain in the scrotum or testicles
- infertility.

These types of barrier protection are helpful in preventing STIs:

- the condom
- the vaginal condom
- dental dams.

How to start a conversation about sexual health

Talk with your partner/s about whether you, or they:

- have had an STI before, and whether it has been treated
- have had a sexual health check and when
- are in agreement about safe sex practices, like types of protection and contraception.

Practise safe sex

Even if sexual contact doesn't involve any blood, semen or vaginal fluids being passed between partners, you can still minimise the risk that you'll get an STI or BBV (blood borne virus). Remember, nothing is ever 100% risk free.

Sexual activity between people who have vaginas has a lower risk of STI transmission, but lower risk doesn't mean there's no risk at all. Similarly, anal sex (regardless of gender identity or sexuality) has a higher chance of resulting in an STI, but using condoms correctly can dramatically reduce that risk.

Preventing HIV

As well as using condoms, there are specific things that you can take before or after sex to reduce the chance of getting HIV from a partner. Talk to your GP or a sexual health nurse for more information.

Contraception

Contraception is using methods to prevent unintended pregnancy. There are different forms of contraception, that when used properly, can be very effective.

Types of contraception include:

- contraceptive pill
- condoms
- diaphragms
- contraceptive injections
- Implanon
- intrauterine device (IUD).

Condoms are the only form of contraception that can protect against both pregnancy and STIs.

Contraception is not 100% effective

There's always a very small chance of pregnancy. Using hormonal contraceptive (the pill) and a condom is the safest option to prevent unintended pregnancy.

If you're worried you may be pregnant, because you recently had unprotected sex, you can speak to a health professional about the emergency contraceptive pill (ECP). This is sometimes called the 'morning after pill'. It's important to take it as soon as possible after you had unprotected sex.

Getting tested

If you're sexually active, it's recommended that you get tested for STIs once a year, even if you use protection. This can be done as part of a routine visit to the general practitioner (GP) or at a headspace centre.

It can sometimes help to talk it through with someone first. You may want to get advice from someone you trust, like a family member, teacher or counsellor.

Your GP can also give you information to help you maintain your sexual health.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au



If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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