

## Contact numbers

**Contraceptive Education Service (England)** 0171 837 4044

A confidential helpline providing information on all methods of contraception, sexual health and local clinics. Mon-Fri 9am-7pm.

**Northern Ireland** 01234 225 466

**Scotland** 0141 876 5086

**Wales** 01222 343 766

**Relate** 01788 578 241

A national counselling organisation which can put you in touch with their local branches. Relate offers confidential counselling to individuals and couples on relationships and sexual difficulties. Mon-Fri 9am-5pm.

**Black Advisory Centres** 0171 713 9000

Free contraceptive advice and supplies, pregnancy testing and counselling for young people. Ring for details of your nearest branch or health authority serving people's services. Mon-Thu 9am-5pm, Fri 9am-4pm.

**Issue 1** 01273 449 4114

Advice, information and a guide to clinics for women and men experiencing infertility problems. Mon-Fri 9:30am-4:30pm.

### The Law

**Sex between a man and a woman** Across England, Scotland and Wales the legal age of consent is 16. In Northern Ireland it's 17.

**Anal sex between a man and a woman** In England and Wales the legal age of consent is 18. In Scotland it's 16. In Northern Ireland it's illegal.

**Anal sex between two men** The legal age of consent across the UK is 18, provided both men consent.

**Sex between two women** There is no specific law on the age of consent, but certain laws suggest that both women must consent and be over 16, except in Northern Ireland where they must be over 17.

**Remember, contact a sexual health clinic or your doctor if you are worried or unsure about anything to do with your sexual health.**



Health Education Authority  
Hamilton House  
Mabeyon Place  
London WC1H 9TX

**British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS)** 0845 3004950

Provides abortion services and the abortion support, pregnancy testing, contraceptive advice, emergency contraception, sterilisation and vasectomy. Ring the Freeline for a confidential appointment to a consultation centre.

Mon-Fri 8am-8pm Sat 9:30am-5pm Sun 9:30am-2:30pm

**National AIDS Helpline (NAH)** 0800 567 122

A 24-hour, 7-day a week, free and confidential telephone service providing advice about HIV/AIDS, sexual health, blood services, drug and support services. For details of minority ethnic language services phone NAH.

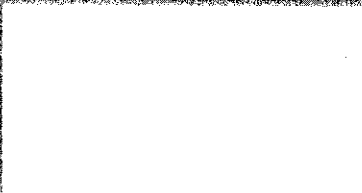
**Welsh Language Line** 0800 771111  
Daily 9am-10pm

A **Whisper Service** available for people with hearing difficulties on 0800 771 1111. See [www.whisper.org.uk](http://www.whisper.org.uk)

**London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard** 0171 837 7926

A 24-hour, 7-day a week helpline offering a range of services including sexual health advice.

Local information



# Sexual health matters for women



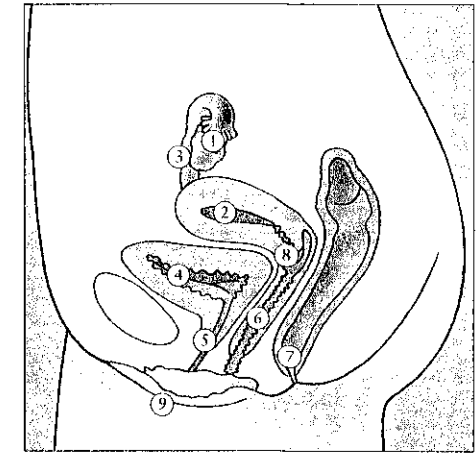
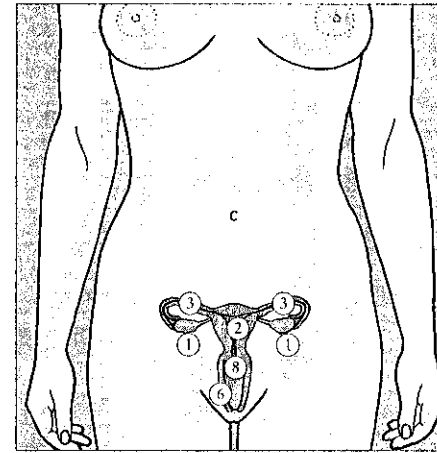
This booklet is an introduction to sexual health matters for women. It gives you up-to-date information and advice on a wide range of topics, including:

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Sexual health is about being able to enjoy your sexuality in a way that also protects your health and well-being.

The best way to protect your own and your partner's sexual health is to practise safer sex. Safer sex means being aware of the risks you face. It also means taking steps to reduce your chances of getting or passing on a sexually transmitted infection, or having an unintended pregnancy. And because safer sex reduces your risks, you can relax and enjoy sex even more.

*Sexuality*



### Know your body

- ① **Ovary** There are two ovaries, each about the size of an almond, which produce the eggs, or ova.
- ② **Womb, or uterus** About the size and shape of a small, upside-down pear. It is made of muscle and grows in size as the baby grows.
- ③ **Fallopian tube** There are two tubes leading from the ovaries to the womb.
- ④ **Bladder** Sac formed of muscular and fibrous tissue which holds urine.
- ⑤ **Urethra, or water passage** Tube which carries urine from the bladder.
- ⑥ **Vagina** Tube about 8 cm (3 in) long. It leads from the cervix to the vulva, where it opens between the legs. The vagina is very elastic so it can easily stretch around a man's penis, or around a baby during labour.
- ⑦ **Anus** Opening at the lower end of the bowel which is kept closed by two muscles.
- ⑧ **Cervix** The neck of the womb. It is normally all but closed, with just a small opening through which blood passes during the monthly period.
- ⑨ **Clitoris** Small, sensitive organ at the top of the female genitalia. During sexual excitement, the clitoris enlarges and hardens and may be the focus of orgasm.



### The cervical smear test

The cervical smear test is simple, quick and painless. It checks the health of the cervix (the lower part of the womb (8)). For most women, it shows that the cells of the cervix are normal and healthy. The signs that cancer of the cervix may develop can be spotted on the smear, and the growth can be stopped before it even gets started.

You can get a smear test at your GP surgery, or at family planning or NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics.

#### How often should I be tested?

Regular smear tests are important. They pick up the early warning signals that could save your life. All women aged 20 to 64 are now offered a free cervical smear test every 3 to 5 years by the NHS. You should be tested more frequently if cell changes are found when you have a smear.

For more information about the cervical smear test, ask your doctor for a copy of the leaflet *Your smear test* (see also p.15).



### Breast awareness

One in 12 women in the UK develops breast cancer. It is one of the most common forms of cancer in women, with 27,000 new cases diagnosed each year.

Although breast cancer rarely affects women under the age of 35, women of all ages are advised to familiarise themselves with the normal look and feel of their breasts. If you notice anything which causes you concern, you should see a doctor.

Similarly, women of any age with one or more close relatives – a mother, sister or even grandparent – who have developed breast cancer may wish to speak to their GP if they are concerned about inherited risk.

Breast screening (mammography) is an x-ray examination which can help identify even small changes in the breast before they develop further. If changes are caught early, there's a good chance of them being successfully treated.



Under the NHS Breast-Screening Programme, all women between the ages of 50 and 64 are invited to attend a free breast-screening session, providing they are registered with a GP. Older women are also entitled to a 3-yearly screening on request.

Screening can save lives. It's a good idea for everyone who is invited for a screening to attend, and for older women to continue to request a 3-yearly screening.

For more information on cervical and breast cancer, contact the Women's Nationwide Cancer Control Campaign Hotline, tel. 0171 729 2299.

#### Be breast aware

- \* Become familiar with your breasts and the natural changes that take place during your normal cycle.
- \* Look at your breasts while changing, or feel them while bathing.
- \* Look for any changes, such as a lump or thickening in the breast or armpit, any unusual pain, discharge from the nipple, unusual changes in the outline, shape or size of the breast, any unusual sensation.
- \* If you find a change that is unusual, contact your GP as soon as possible. There may be many reasons for changes in the breast. Most of them are harmless, but all of them should be checked, as there is a small chance that they could be the first sign of cancer.



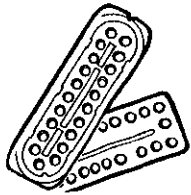
### Planning for pregnancy?

You can get information and advice from your GP, practice nurse or family planning clinic if you are planning a pregnancy.

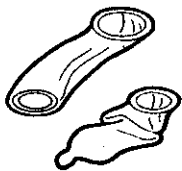
If you are trying to become pregnant, remember to take a 400-microgram supplement of folic acid every day. You should give up smoking and reduce your consumption of alcohol if you can, and not take any drugs without talking to your doctor first.

For more information, ask your doctor for the leaflet *Folic acid – what all women should know*.

If you have been trying to become pregnant for at least one year, see a doctor. There are many causes of infertility, some of which can be treated. Specialist advice is available from Issue, tel. 0121 344 4414 ( see also back cover).



*The Pill*



*Female and male condoms*



*Diaphragm or cap with spermicide*

### What forms of contraception are available?

If you do not wish to become pregnant, you need to use a reliable method of contraception every time you have sex. No contraception will give 100% protection against pregnancy, but all the methods available in the UK are very effective when used correctly and consistently. All contraceptive methods are available free of charge.

Different methods of contraception suit different people at different times – it is important to choose a method which suits you.

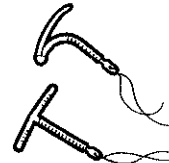
#### Reversible methods of contraception

Contraceptive methods work in different ways and protect against pregnancy for different lengths of time. With some methods, how effective they are in protecting against pregnancy depends on how carefully they are used. It is important to use these methods correctly and consistently according to instructions:

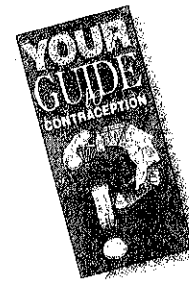
- \* combined pill
- \* progestogen-only pill
- \* male condom
- \* female condom
- \* diaphragm or cap with spermicide
- \* natural family planning



*Intrauterine system (IUS)*



*Intrauterine device (IUD)*



With other contraceptives, effectiveness does not depend on the person using the method. These methods protect against pregnancy until it is time for them to be renewed or replaced by a doctor or nurse:

- \* contraceptive injection
- \* contraceptive implants
- \* intrauterine system (IUS)
- \* intrauterine device (IUD), which used to be called the coil

#### Permanent methods

Sterilisation (male and female) is different from other contraceptive methods because it is permanent. You should only choose sterilisation if you are sure you will never want a baby in the future.

#### Protection against sexually transmitted infections

Male and female condoms, used on their own or with other contraceptive methods, can also help protect against sexually transmitted infections if used properly every time you have sex.

#### Free information and advice

When choosing or changing your contraceptive method, make sure you have all the information you need. Leaflets about contraception should be free and available from local health services such as health centres, clinics and pharmacies.

A doctor or nurse at your GP's surgery, family planning clinic or a young people's clinic, such as a Brook Advisory Centre, can give you information and help you decide which is the best method for you.

Information and advice is also available from the Contraceptive Education Service telephone helpline on 0171 837 4044.

Whichever method you choose, make sure that you understand how to use it, and know what to do if you have any difficulties and where to get advice if you think you have been at risk of pregnancy.





You are at risk of pregnancy if you have sex without using contraception or if something prevents your contraceptive method from working properly (for example, if you missed one or more pills, or if a condom split or slipped off).

#### Emergency contraception

If you think you are at risk of pregnancy you may be able to use emergency contraception. This works after you've had sex and before pregnancy begins.

There are two types of emergency contraception:

- Emergency contraceptive pills (which used to be called the 'morning after pill'). These must be started within 3 days (72 hours) from the time you had sex.
- An IUD fitted within 5 days from the time you had sex. Once it has been fitted you can keep it as a regular method of contraception, or you can have it removed when your next period starts.

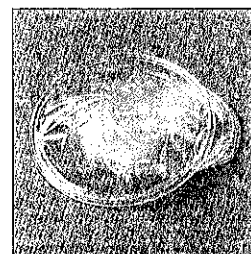
You can get emergency contraception from most GPs (not just your own doctor), any family planning clinic or young people's clinics, such as Brook Advisory Centres. Some NHS GUM/sexual health clinics and hospital Accident and Emergency departments also provide it.



Remember that symptoms may not appear for months, and some people get no symptoms at all. Others have symptoms which come and go even though the infection is still there.



Male condoms



Female condom

#### How do I reduce the risk of a sexually transmitted infection?

Anyone can get a sexually transmitted infection if they have unprotected sex with someone who is infected. These infections occur frequently in both men and women.

Some of the more common sexually transmitted infections include:

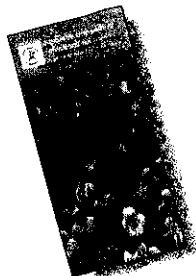
- genital warts
- chlamydia
- genital herpes
- gonorrhoea (the clap)

Often there are no symptoms, so you could have an infection and not know it. Get medical advice straight away if you think you or your partner might have an infection. Most sexually transmitted infections can be treated quickly and easily if detected early on. Some can cause serious long-term problems if left untreated. For example, chlamydia can lead to infertility and hepatitis B can cause liver problems.

You can reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection by:

- Using a condom for penetrative sex (when the penis enters the vagina, anus or mouth).
- Exploring other ways of having sex such as kissing, stroking and touching.
- Using a dental dam (a thin latex-square barrier) to cover the vulva or anus during oral sex. Dental dams are available from some sexual health clinics, chemists and mail-order agencies. Contact the National AIDS Helpline for details, on FREEPHONE 0800 567 123 (see also back cover).
- Using condoms on sex toys such as vibrators or dildos if they are being shared. Wash the sex toy between activities and put on a new condom for each partner and activity. Do not use the same condom for vaginal sex after using it in the anal area: you could transfer bacteria which may cause a vaginal infection.
- Using latex gloves with lubricant for finger or hand insertion.

For further advice on HIV and for more information about condoms and sexually transmitted infections, ask your doctor for copies of the HEA leaflets, *Facts About AIDS, HIV and the Test*, *The condom guide - making sex safer* and *Sexually transmitted infections - how to prevent them, and where to go for help*.



## HIV

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the most serious sexually transmitted infection. It damages the body's defence system so that it cannot fight off certain infections. Most people with HIV look and feel healthy for a long time, sometimes 10 years or more. They may not even know they have the virus, but they can still pass it on to others through semen, blood and vaginal fluids.

When someone with HIV goes on to get certain illnesses, this condition is called AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

HIV can be passed on:

- By having vaginal or anal sex without a condom with someone who has HIV.
- By using needles, syringes or other drug-injecting equipment that is infected with HIV.
- From a woman with HIV to her baby during pregnancy, at birth or through breastfeeding.
- HIV can also be passed on through oral sex, although the risk is much lower than having vaginal or anal sex without a condom.

## Other infections

Unprotected sex is not the only way you can get an infection in the genital area. Some infections such as thrush and cystitis can occur even if you have never had sex.

If you get these often, try avoiding perfumed bubble bath and deodorants in the genital area. Wash and wipe your bottom from front to back to help stop bacteria spreading from the anus. For more information, ask your doctor for the *Thrush* and *Cystitis* factsheets (see also p.15).



If you would like to discuss the best protection against pregnancy and infection, your GP or a doctor at a family planning or NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic will be able to help you.

## The warning signs

The following symptoms may be a sign of infection:

- An unusually thick or watery, cloudy or smelly discharge from the vagina.
- Itching, rashes, sores, blisters or pain in the genital area.
- A pain or burning sensation when you pass urine.
- Urinating more frequently than usual.
- Pain during sex.

## Where to go for help

If you have sex without using a condom with someone who has an infection, you could get an infection, even if your partner has no symptoms. Don't wait for symptoms to appear. If you think you've been at risk, ask for a check-up at your GP's or at an NHS sexual health clinic, often called an STD (sexually transmitted disease) or GUM (genito-urinary medicine) clinic.

NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer free checks and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. Some offer women-only sessions. The service is strictly confidential.

You can go to any NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic, anywhere in the country. You don't have to use a local one and you don't have to be referred by your GP. (Non-NHS sexual health clinics do not always offer the full range of services which are available at NHS sexual health clinics.) You will not be tested for HIV without your consent.

If you don't seek treatment, the infection could get worse. For more information, see the HEA's *Sexually transmitted infections - how to prevent them and where to go for help* and range of factsheets (see p.14). Or call a helpline (see back cover).

It's a good idea to have a check-up at an NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic if you have a new partner, or if either of you have more than one sexual partner.



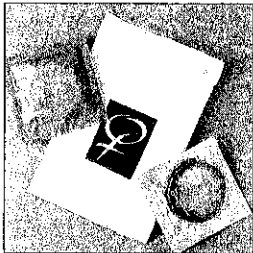
### What risks am I taking?

To make sex safer for you, you need to think carefully about the risks you face and take sensible steps to reduce them. These risks may change as your relationships and your lifestyle change.

Try to anticipate situations when the risks could be greater. For example:

- \* Take condoms with you on holiday, even if you don't expect to need them.
- \* Watch out for alcohol and drugs – they lower your inhibitions and can affect the decisions you make about what is safe. You could end up doing something you regret later.

Be realistic and plan ahead

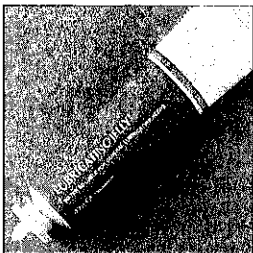


### Condom talk

Many women find it difficult to suggest using a condom with their partner. But once you have decided to have sex, the earlier you discuss it, the less likely you are to get carried away and end up not using any protection.

Try to steer the conversation around to safer sex. You can then let your partner know what you think and see how they feel too. You could be pleasantly surprised. Your partner may find it just as difficult and would welcome the lead.

Many women carry their own condoms. Being prepared doesn't mean planning to sleep around – it is a responsible thing to do and shows you take your sexual health seriously.



### Sexual problems

Sexual problems are common and can cause distress to both partners. Almost 1 in 5 people experience them at some time in their lives.

Such problems include:

- \* Loss of desire for sex – which often affects women following pregnancy, but can also happen at other times.
- \* Vaginismus – a painful spasm of the vagina which can happen during sex.
- \* Difficulty reaching orgasm – which may be caused by anxiety and difficulty in relaxing with your sexual partner. It often helps if you and your partner take time to explore what is pleasurable for you.

Many women find it hard to talk about these problems because they are so personal. But your GP or an NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic will be able to help you. You might be referred to a counsellor or a specialist doctor who is used to dealing with these problems. If you wish, you and your partner can be seen together.

Some NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer a counselling service within the clinic. Check with your local clinic to see what they offer, and remember it's good to talk.



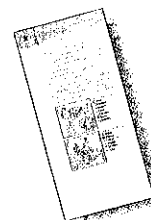
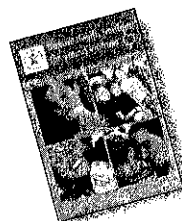
### Woman to woman

The information given in this booklet about regular cervical smear tests and breast awareness is important for all women – gay, straight or bisexual.

Sexually transmitted infections can be passed from woman to woman. Practising safer sex can help to prevent sexually transmitted infections (see p. 9).

If you are concerned about your sexuality, talking can help. Organisations such as the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard offer confidential help and advice on this and other sexual health issues, on 0171 837 7324 (see also back cover).

Some NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer confidential services for women who have sex with women. Ring the National AIDS Helpline for details, on FREEPHONE 0800 567 123 (see also back cover).



### Further advice

You can get free, confidential treatment and advice at any family planning or NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic, or from your GP. You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD). Or phone your local hospital and ask for the 'special' or GUM clinic.

Ask at your GP surgery whether they have a well-woman clinic, or contact Women's Health on 0171 251 6580 (Mon, Wed-Fri 10am-4pm) or your local Community Health Council to find your nearest well-woman clinic.

### Further information

The Health Education Authority produces a range of leaflets about sexual health including:

- \* *Sexual health matters for young men/women*
- \* *Sexual health matters for men*
- \* *The condom guide – making sex safer*
- \* *Sexually transmitted infections – how to prevent them, and where to go for help*
- \* *Facts about AIDS, HIV and the test*
- \* *Your smear test*
- \* *Folic acid – what all women should know*
- \* *Cystitis – and what to do about it*

A series of factsheets is also available on a range of infections and conditions, such as bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis (A, B and C), infestations, pelvic inflammatory disease, syphilis, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

To order free copies of any sexual health leaflets call the National AIDS Helpline, free, on 0800 567 123 or contact your local health promotion unit for copies of any health education leaflets or factsheets (in the phone book under your local health authority).

**This leaflet can only give basic information about sexual health. The information is based on the evidence and medical opinion available at the time of printing.**