

COVID-19 and Sexual Health

Full Factsheet



NATIONAL COALITION FOR
SEXUAL HEALTH

Overview

COVID-19 is a serious, life-threatening illness which continues to affect thousands of Americans. The number of people infected changes every day, and is likely to do so for many months to come. So, whether you're on stay at home, safer at home, or no orders at all, it's still important that you take steps to reduce your risk of getting COVID-19. These steps include physical distancing, wearing a mask, washing hands regularly, assessing your and your partner's risk of having COVID-19, practicing safer sex, and limiting your number of partners.

1. How is COVID-19 spread?

- When a person with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes, or talks they can spread the virus through tiny droplets in the air. These droplets can land in your mouth or nose, or you can breathe them in. This occurs when people are in close contact with each other (within about 6 feet)*.
- When you touch a surface that was recently touched by someone with COVID-19 and then you touch your mouth, nose, or possibly eyes.
- The virus can be shared through saliva or mucus.
- In a few studies, the virus has been found in the feces of some people who are infected.
- You or your partner could be infected with COVID-19, but not have any symptoms. And you could still spread the virus.
- **What does six feet apart look like?** You can use your arms. When you extend your arms on both sides—from fingertip to fingertip—it's about the same length as your height. To be safe, keep three arm spans between you and someone else. <https://cnn.it/3bGLC9m>
- You can reduce your risk of getting COVID-19 by wearing a mask in public, physical distancing (staying at least six feet away from others), and washing your hands regularly.

2. How is COVID-19 spread through sexual activity?

- **If you're close enough to touch an infected partner, you're close enough to get the virus.** This could happen when doing things like hugging, talking face-to-face, holding hands, and sitting or lying in bed together.
- Kissing an infected partner can easily spread the virus.
- Sexual activity that includes using the mouth or tongue on the butt or anus of a partner might also spread the virus.

- There is still a lot to learn about how the virus is spread, and whether it can be shared via semen and/or vaginal fluids. In one small study, the virus was found in semen; however, we don't know if it can be transmitted via semen during sexual contact (vaginal or anal intercourse, and/or oral sex). A small number of studies have tested vaginal fluids for the virus; at this point, the virus has not been detected. More studies are needed about the sexual transmission of the virus.

3. Which partners are safest during COVID-19?

For many of us, sex, intimacy, and romantic relationships are a key part of life. With COVID-19, you might have to make some changes in your routine, but a safe and satisfying sex life is still possible if you know the facts and take steps to reduce risk.

People have different types of partners and partnerships. Some partners live together, while others are in relationships but live apart. Some have casual partners, and others have new partners. Here are some general guidelines:

- **You are your safest sex partner.** Masturbation is safe and can be very pleasurable. You could also choose to use sex toys. This is a great time to figure out what feels good to you. Before and after sex, be sure to wash your hands and sex toys with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- **The next safest is a partner you live with, who you know is practicing physical distancing, handwashing, and wearing a mask in public regularly.** But before getting intimate, you should still assess your risk and take steps to reduce your risk. (See #4 below).
- **It's safest to avoid close contact and sexual activity – especially kissing – with anyone outside of your household,** particularly with new or casual partners. You can also reduce your exposure to COVID-19 by reducing your number of partners.
 - However, the choice to be sexually active is always up to you. If you decide you would like to be intimate with a partner, see #4 below for ways you can assess and then reduce your risk.
- **If you and your partner(s) don't live together,** this can be very challenging, emotionally and sexually. However, it may be safest to avoid physical contact for now. There are other options to help you stay connected: video dates, sexting or phone dates. For tips on how to do so safely: <https://www.insider.com/how-to-sext-safely-experts-2019-4>. (See message #5 for tips if you want to see each other and #6 for keeping your relationship strong).
 - **Note:** No one should pressure you to share images that you don't want to. Be careful with sharing images since they could be recorded and/or shared with others. If you're under age 18, it is illegal to share explicit images.
- **Interested in dating someone new?** For now, you should avoid in-person dates. Instead, it's safest to date virtually. And fortunately, there are many ways to do so. You can get to know new partners online, or through video dates, sexting, or chat rooms.

- Dating apps are now adding features that allow you to video chat, and easily connect by voice and video. This slow build-up could lay a great foundation for a future relationship. (For tips on communicating safely: <https://www.insider.com/how-to-sext-safely-experts-2019-4>)
- If you make money by having sex, consider taking a break from in-person dates. Video dates, sexting or chat rooms may be options for you.

4. How can I reduce my risk of COVID-19 during close contact and sexual activity?

- First, it's key to assess your risk and your partner's risk of having COVID-19. Here are some questions to help you do so.
 - Are you and your partner following the guidelines for physical distancing, handwashing regularly, and wearing masks in public settings where it's not easy to physically distance?
 - Could you or your partner have been exposed to the virus, through working outside the home, frequent trips to the store, public transport, and/or other people in your household?
 - Do you have COVID-19, any symptoms, or been exposed to someone with the virus?
 - If either of you are at risk, you should decide together if you want to avoid sexual activity for now.
- Remember, any close contact with an infected partner can spread the virus, and either you or your partner could be infected and not know it. This close contact could include talking face-to-face, hugging, sitting on the couch, or lying in bed.
- If you and your partner decide to engage in sexual activity, be sure to wash your hands and sex toys for at least 20 seconds before and after sexual contact.
- To reduce risk, you can also avoid kissing; avoid sexual activity that includes using the mouth or tongue on the butt or anus of a partner; use condoms and/or dental dams during oral or anal sex; and engage in mutual masturbation (masturbate on your own, but together).
- Remember, only have sex if both partners are feeling well. If either of you have COVID-19, or any symptoms that could be from COVID-19 (such as fever, dry cough or shortness of breath), you should avoid sexual contact, especially kissing.
 - If you or your partner has a medical condition that increases the risk of COVID-19 complications, such as lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, or a weakened immune system, you might want to avoid sexual activity.
- If you have symptoms that could be from COVID-19, talk with a health care provider about getting tested. Contact your local health department or provider about testing locations. If you have COVID-19, be sure to tell your partners.

- To avoid STIs and/or unplanned pregnancy, remember to practice safer sex. This could include using condoms, birth control, and/or taking medications to prevent HIV infections and to reduce herpes outbreaks.

5. What if I don't live with my partner(s), but want to see them?

- If you are not living with your partner, or you do not have a partner, you are not alone. Currently, 61% of adults ages 35 and younger don't live with a spouse or partner. According to another survey, 51% of adults (ages 18-34) say they don't have a romantic partner.
- Here are some tips if you'd like to see your partner(s):
 - First, check out any local "stay at home" orders to find out what's allowed. In many areas, travelling to see a partner or friend is considered "non-essential" travel, and could result in penalties, such as fines or jail time.
 - Consider physical distancing when you see your partner. You could "see" each other from at least six feet apart, talk, but not have any physical contact.
 - Remember you're at risk as soon as you get within six feet of a person. If you want to have physical contact, carefully consider your risk (and your partner's) of being infected with COVID-19. Then decide together what risks you are willing to take. (See #4 for a list of questions to assess risk).
 - The best scenario if you want to be intimate but live apart: you both live by yourselves; you work/study at home; you always follow the guidelines for physical distancing, handwashing, and wearing a mask in public; and you can travel to each other's places without being in contact with other people. (https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/9394xp/should-i-see-my-partner-if-we-dont-live-together)
 - If you decide to get physical, you can reduce your risk if you avoid kissing; avoid sexual activity that includes using the mouth or tongue on the butt or anus of a partner; and use condoms or dams during oral and anal sex. And, to prevent STIs and/or unplanned pregnancies, you can use condoms, birth control, and/or medications to prevent HIV and herpes outbreaks.
 - And, finally consider: if you get the virus from your partner, will you bring it home and infect others in your household?

6. How can I keep my relationship(s) strong during COVID-19?

With COVID-19, some of us are spending a lot more time together, while others are spending a lot more time apart. In either case, this can put some stress and strain on your relationship(s). However, you can take steps to keep your relationship(s) strong.

- **If you and your partner(s) are living apart under stay-at-home orders, this can be really tough.** It's important to keep in touch and connected. Talk with each other about the best ways of doing so. Options could include phone calls, texting or sexting; online video date nights; watching movies or TV together; playing online games; or even cooking together. (See message #5 for more tips).
- **Carve out time for yourself.** Many of us are spending much more time with our partner(s) than usual. And, maybe with other family members, too. So, be sure to spend some time on your own, and do things that you enjoy. For example, taking a walk, reading, doing art, talking with friends, or just watching a favorite TV show or movie.
- **Don't forget quality partner time, too.** Whether your partner is long-distance or with you every day, it's important to check in with each other, and spend quality time together. You could plan an at-home "date night," a walk together, watch a movie, or an online "date night" to stay connected.
- **Empathy and kindness.** We're facing a stressful time with COVID-19, most of us are living in close quarters, we might be anxious, and our daily lives have changed in a big way. Remember to be patient and forgiving with both yourself and your partners.
- **It's normal to disagree from time-to-time, but you can avoid real damage by arguing in a fair way.** This means calmly explaining why you are upset and focusing on specific behaviors or examples. Check out the Five Action Steps for more tips: <https://www.fiveactionsteps.org/4>.
- **It's ok if your sex life is not all you want it to be even with extra time on your hands.** You might want to talk about your desires and fantasies and try something new. Or, if you have mismatched sex drives – one wants more and one wants less – it's important to talk about solutions. For more ideas, go to: <https://www.fiveactionsteps.org/4>
- **If you are struggling in your relationship and want more support, consider online or phone counseling.** To find a counselor, check these sites: <https://www.aasect.org/referral-directory> or https://www.aamft.org/Directories/Find_a_Therapist.aspx
- **If you feel unsafe in your relationship and/or your partner is being abusive, seek help right away.** You can chat online with NDVH: <https://www.thehotline.org/what-is-live-chat/>.
- **Think about putting a buddy system in place.** Designate one or two trusted people outside of the home that you can contact with a code word to warn when you are in trouble and need help.

7. What if I'm in an abusive relationship and on stay at home orders?

- If you're in an abusive relationship, being on lock-down with your abuser(s) can be even more challenging and risky. This is also true if your family mistreats you because of your sexual orientation or gender identity.
- If possible, try to make a plan to minimize your risk. For example, find the safest room or area in your living space that you can escape to if there are signs that violence or verbal abuse may occur.
- If possible and safe to do so, put some space between you and your abuser. Things like taking walks, driving to the store or sitting in the stairwell of an apartment building will give you some relief from the situation, even if only temporarily.
- Prepare a safety plan and have an emergency bag hidden in your home should you need to leave quickly. (<https://www.loveisrespect.org/for-yourself/safety-planning/interactive-safety-plan/>)
- If you have access to a phone, internet and/or social media, stay connected with family and friends. If you know someone who may be living in a dangerous situation, reach out to them often.
- Most importantly, remember, if you or your loved ones are threatened with violence or feel unsafe, call 911 for immediate help.
- Carefully consider how you communicate during lockdown when your privacy might be limited. It could be risky to make a call if your abuser can hear the conversation. Consider texting and online chats instead. However, if your abuser has access to your phone or computer, you might want to delete your history.
- For support and counseling, you can live chat with the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#).

8. How can I get STI testing/treatment, birth control, and other services?

- Taking care of your sexual health is important, even during a pandemic like COVID-19. This care could include STI testing and treatment, birth control, HIV care and treatment, and other services, like immunizations.
- For routine sexual health care, many health care providers are using phone and video appointments (telehealth) instead of in-person visits. This “no-touch” care reduces contact with other people, and the risk of getting COVID-19. Check with your local health care provider, health department, clinic, or hospital to see what sexual health services are available near you.
- In-person care and treatment are usually still available for people who have symptoms, are undergoing treatment, or have emergencies. In some places, in-person care is now available for routine visits.

- **For sexually transmitted infections:**

- If you have any STI symptoms, you should contact your health care provider or clinic and seek care right away. You should also do so if you have had sex with someone recently diagnosed with an STI. You should be able to get treatment via phone (telemedicine) and/or in-person.
- If you have been diagnosed with an STI and are under treatment, it's important to complete all medication and care with your provider.
- If you are living with HIV or on PrEP, it's important to talk with your health care provider about how you can safely access medications, screenings, and other services.
- If you'd like to get routine screening for STIs, such as chlamydia or gonorrhea, check with your local provider, clinic, or health department about availability, including at-home testing. Given COVID-19, it might be more challenging to find in-person services. As a result, preventing STIs and practicing safer sex is key. To learn more, go to www.fiveactionsteps.org/step2.

- **For birth control:**

- Access to birth control is essential for people who want to plan and/or prevent pregnancies. And, even during COVID-19, there are many options for doing so.
- Many providers are currently offering birth control via phone or video appointments (telehealth) and some are currently seeing patients in-person. Check with your local provider, health department, or Planned Parenthood for options in your area.
- If you currently have a birth control prescription, ask your provider to give you multiple refills at one time so that you can reduce your number of trips to the pharmacy. (This could include the pill, patch, ring, shot, and emergency contraception.)
- Or, consider ordering your birth control using an online option to get your prescription via mail without an in-person visit. (<https://www.bedsider.org/features/851-how-to-get-birth-control-delivered-right-to-your-door>)
- If you'd like to use a new method of birth control that requires an in-person visit (e.g., IUD or implant insertion), check with your local provider, community health center, and/or Planned Parenthood.
- Remember: you can always order condoms online or pick them up at your local store when shopping for essentials. Or, you might be able to get them for free or at reduced cost from local health departments, STD clinics, or health centers. Condoms can help prevent both STIs and pregnancy. (<https://www.bedsider.org/methods/condom>)

9. How can I access HIV care and treatment, PrEP, and testing?

- If you are living with HIV during COVID-19, taking care of your health is very important. It's key to stay on care and treatment, or to start it now. HIV weakens your immune system, and if you get COVID-19, you can be at higher risk of complications from this new virus. But treatment can build up your immune system; help you live a longer, healthier life; and reduce the risk of giving HIV to your partner(s).
- HIV is not going away during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 1.1 million people in the U.S. are living with HIV, and nearly 40,000 get infected every year. So, taking steps to prevent HIV, such as using condoms (external or internal) or dental dams, taking the medication PrEP, and/or getting tested for HIV, are still essential.

HIV Care and Treatment for People Living with HIV

- If you take steps to strengthen your immune system, you may be able to better fight off infections, like COVID-19. These steps include:
 - If you are currently getting HIV care and treatment, be sure to keep up your routine. (<https://www.greaterthan.org/campaigns/lets-talk-about-hiv-treatment/>)
 - If you are not currently getting care, try to get connected with a local health care provider and start treatment as soon as possible. (<https://findhivcare.hrsa.gov>)
 - Take medications (Antiretrovirals or ARTs) every day as prescribed by your health care provider. Refill your medications, and make sure you have a 30- to 90-day supply on hand.
 - Stay in touch with your provider, and discuss options for regular check-ins and lab work through virtual, phone, or in-person visits.
 - Try to maintain a healthy lifestyle such as eating well, exercising, and getting plenty of sleep.
 - Mental health matters, too! Stay connected with friends and/or family, but do so safely at a distance (at least six feet apart) and/or virtually.
 - If you can't access services and/or medications due to cost, there are options available. Check out these websites: www.findHIVcare.hrsa.gov (Ryan White providers) and www.hab.hrsa.gov (State AIDS hotlines).
 - To help prevent infection with COVID-19, see sections #1- 5 of this factsheet. You can also check out CDC's guidelines: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/20.

Taking PrEP to Prevent HIV

- If you don't have HIV and want to avoid getting it through sexual activity (e.g., anal, vaginal or oral sex), you can take a daily medication called PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis). It's safe and over 90% effective in preventing HIV infection. To learn more, go to www.PleasePrepMe.org.

- Even if you've never taken PrEP before, you can talk with your provider about starting it now. You should be able to make an appointment either in-person or via telehealth. Then, your provider will order lab tests. If your provider says PrEP is right for you, you will get a prescription, and have follow-up visits every three months. If you'd like to find a provider, go to www.PleasePrepMe.org/find-a-provider or to an online PrEP service: www.pleaseprepme.org/online-providers.
- **Should you take PrEP during COVID-19 when your sex life might be on hold?** That's totally up to you. But, here are some pros and cons to help you decide:
 - If you are having sex (anal, vaginal, or oral sex) with partners – inside and/or outside of your household – you should stay on PrEP to reduce risk of HIV infection.
 - Even if you're not having sex right now, you may want to stay on PrEP since you're in the routine, it's safe and effective, and you'll be ready to go as soon as you want to have sex.
 - If you want to stop PrEP, first talk with your health care provider. Make sure to ask how many days you need to continue taking it after you last had sex. And, if you have chronic hepatitis B, seek your provider's advice before you stop PrEP.
 - If you stop PrEP and do have sex, you can still take steps to reduce your risk of HIV. You can use a condom (internal or external), or a dental dam.
 - Or, if you stop PrEP, have sex without a condom, and think you might have been exposed to HIV, you can take a medication called PEP (Post-exposure prophylaxis) <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html>.
 - If you stopped taking PrEP but want to restart it, you need to contact your health care provider and get tested for HIV. If you don't have HIV, you can start taking PrEP again.
- **Tips for staying on PrEP during COVID-19:**
 - Talk with your health care provider about how to keep up with regular PrEP care. You might have visits via telehealth (phone, video, online), in-person, and/or modify your visit schedule.
 - Be sure to have plenty of your medication on hand. Ask your provider for a 30- to 90- day supply, and explore mail order or drive-up pharmacy options to reduce your visits to stores.
 - If you can't afford to pay for PrEP or related health care visits, explore these options: <https://www.greaterthan.org/videos/pep-without-insurance/> or <https://preplocator.org/>.

Getting Tested for HIV During COVID-19

- It's estimated that 160,000 people with HIV in the United States don't know they have it. This means 1/7 people with HIV have not been tested and diagnosed.

- During COVID-19, accessing HIV testing could be more challenging, but it's still possible to do so. Talk with your health care provider, local clinic, or health department about your options. Some are now offering at-home self-testing, while others are still providing in-person services. To learn more, check out: <https://locator.hiv.gov>, call 1-800-232-4636, <https://gettested.cdc.gov> or text your zip code to KNOW IT (566948).
- Testing is the gateway to care and treatment, and to a longer, healthier life for people with HIV. Thanks to effective medications and health care, HIV is now a chronic condition that people can manage and live with. (www.cdc.gov/hiv/testing).
- The CDC recommends that all adults get tested for HIV at least once, and more often if you are at risk. You should get tested at least once a year if you have unprotected sex (without condoms, dams, and/or PrEP), an STI or have a partner who has, multiple partners, shared drug injection equipment, or have a partner who engages in any of these behaviors. Also, if you are a man who has sex with men, you should be tested at least once a year, and more often if you're at risk (For more details, go to: www.ncshguide.org).

10. How can I get infertility, pregnancy, and prenatal/postpartum care?

- During this crisis, health care services are changing rapidly to ensure the safety of both patients and providers and to meet urgent and chronic health care needs. COVID-19 will probably be with us for a while and will affect both how health care is provided and how we access it. Check back regularly with your health care provider to see what in-person and telehealth services are available to you.
- Many providers are resuming services to help people achieve pregnancy, including infertility services, both in-person and using telehealth. Returning to reproductive care during this pandemic can be stressful and people may benefit from mental health services specialized in fertility/infertility counseling. Ask your local health care provider, health department, clinic, or hospital what “no touch” and mental health services are available near you.
- Prenatal and postpartum care are essential health care services that remain very important. However, how these services are delivered may change during this time. Some people may have fewer or more spaced out in-person visits, and you may be asked to come alone to these visits. Your provider may also offer more over the phone and/or online video calls.
- Researchers are still learning how the virus may affect those who are pregnant and their fetus. It is always important for pregnant people to protect themselves from illnesses, including COVID-19; however, they may want to be even more careful during this time to limit exposure to the virus. This includes hand washing, physical distancing, wearing a mask in public, following stay-at-home orders, and avoiding exposure to anyone who could have COVID-19.

- Studies show that **pregnant people may be at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19** compared to non-pregnant people, and there **may be increased risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes**, such as preterm birth. One study suggests that **COVID-19 may pass to a fetus** during pregnancy, labor, or delivery. But more research is needed.
- Most hospital and birth centers **are allowing one support person to accompany patients** during labor and delivery. Usually this person will be given a mask to wear and must stay in the room for the duration. And, in most cases, no postpartum visitors are allowed.
- **After birth, a newborn can get the virus if they are exposed.** Talk with your health care provider about the various postpartum precautions that may be needed to minimize the risk to you and your baby.
- **If you have an unplanned or non-viable pregnancy, essential health services, including medication abortion, are still available.** While they might be harder to access, contact your health care provider or clinic about options available to you: <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/abortion-access>
- Many providers are **currently offering birth control** via phone or video appointments and some are currently seeing patients in-person. Check with your local provider, health department, or Planned Parenthood for options in your area. (See Sections #2-5 above for more details about safer sex).

11. What if I've experienced sexual violence, abuse, assault or harassment?

- **Sexual violence, abuse, assault, and harassment do not end during a crisis.** And, in fact, under stay-at-home/safer-at-home orders, it is likely to get worse. Although many sexual assault centers may be limiting in-person services, most remain available to provide free and confidential services through telehealth. For the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline, go to: <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>
- If you think you might have been exposed to HIV, you can take a medicine called PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis). It is important to start PEP as soon as possible, **but no more than 72 hours (three days) after a possible exposure to HIV.** Call your local health care provider, health department, clinic, or hospital to get a prescription over the phone.
- **You do not need a prescription to get emergency contraception** (aka the morning-after pill) to prevent pregnancy. Anybody— of any age or gender—can buy EC at their pharmacy or online without having to visit a health care provider first. Just remember, the sooner you take EC, the better, but you have up to 5 days after unprotected sex to use it.

Links to Other Resources:

- Transmission and prevention of COVID-19
 - [NYC Fact Sheet](#)
 - [DC Health Department Fact Sheet](#)
 - [Whitman Walker: Sex and COVID-19 – Get the Facts](#)
 - [Terrence Higgins Trust: COVID-19 Advice](#)
 - [Fenway Health: COVID-19 and Your Sexual Health](#)
- Relationships
 - [Health, sex and coronavirus: How does sexual intimacy change during a pandemic?](#)
 - [Tough Problems: Relationships in the Time of Coronavirus](#)
 - [How to Help Your Relationship Survive a Lockdown](#)
 - [COVID-19 Lock Down: How to Manage Your Relationships in Tight Quarters](#)
- Sexual Health Services
 - [CDC Letter to STD Prevention Programs & Clinics](#)
 - [The Reproductive Health Access Project: COVID-19 Reproductive Health Care Resources](#)
 - [The American Society for Reproductive Medicine: Patient Management and Clinical Recommendations During the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Pandemic](#)
 - [Family Planning National Training Center: What Family Planning Providers Can Do to Meet Client Needs During COVID-19](#)
 - [The American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists: COVID-19 FAQs for Obstetrician–Gynecologists, Gynecology](#)
- Abusive Relationships
 - [National Domestic Violence Hotline: Staying Safe During COVID-19](#)
 - [National Sexual Violence Resource Center: Resources for COVID-19 Response](#)
 - [Futures Without Violence: COVID-19 Updates](#)
 - [Experts Worried About Rise in Domestic Violence Cases During Coronavirus Pandemic](#)