COVID-19 and Sexual Health

Facts, Partners, & Prevention

NATIONAL COALITION FOR SEXUAL HEALTH

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.

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.

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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.

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.

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?