



## Safer sex and COVID-19

7<sup>th</sup> Sep 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many changes being made in all our lives to try and prevent its spread. Everyone has been advised to stay at home where possible and to adhere to distancing rules when leaving the house. This has led people to be more creative with how they engage in social interactions including sexual encounters.

Sex is an important part of life and should be enjoyed with the consent of all parties but minimising the risk of the spread of COVID-19 is essential.

As lockdown restrictions are eased further<sup>1</sup>, people in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland can now set up support bubbles.<sup>2</sup> This is a government recommendation of choosing a fixed small number of close people, for example another household with whom you have agreed you will be able to have close contact with. As decisions about sex and support bubbles need to be balanced with personal and public health ones, here are further tips on how to have safe sex whilst reducing the spread of COVID-19.

As government [guidance](#) changes, this document may need updating and revising.

### How does COVID-19 spread?<sup>3</sup>

- You can get infected with COVID-19 from another person who has the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
  - ❖ The virus spreads mainly through droplets in the saliva, breath and mucus of people who are infected.
  - ❖ The infected person does not have to look or feel unwell to spread the virus.
- There is so much more to be discovered about COVID-19.
  - ❖ COVID-19 has been found in faeces (“poo”) of people who are infected with the virus.
  - ❖ We do not know if COVID-19 can be spread through vaginal or anal sex, but other types of coronaviruses have been found in various body fluids.<sup>4</sup>

### Can I have sex?

- **Sex with yourself i.e. masturbation** (“wanking”) is a simple way to enjoy sexual pleasure. Masturbation will not spread COVID-19, especially if you wash your hands (and any sex toys) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and afterwards. If you use a shared computer, phone or touch screen whilst masturbating, make sure you disinfect these devices thoroughly.
- **The safest partner in terms of infection risk is someone you live with.** If you live with your sexual partner(s), all of you are feeling well and have not been exposed to COVID-19, then sex might be a great way to have fun, stay connected and relieve anxiety during this stressful time. **Be mindful of your partners’ own mental health during this period and their potential desire to not engage in sexual contact. Healthy relationships and open communication are key.**
- **Limit close contact (including sex) with anyone outside your household.** If you don’t live with your sexual partner, or they are not part of your support bubble, then either move in with them or be part of their support bubble (**ensure they are not shielding and are not part of another household’s support bubble**).
- **However**, if you have symptoms of COVID-19 (these include a new persistent cough, fever of 37.7°C or over, a loss of taste and/or smell) then the advice is that you should self-isolate for 10

days and [order a COVID-19 swab test](#). If someone you live with or someone you have recently had sex with (within or outside of your support bubble) develops symptoms, then everyone in the bubble must self-isolate for 14 days even if you receive a negative test. You may only end isolation early if the person with symptoms in your household has a negative test. **Self-isolating means no physical contact. This means no hugging, sex or kissing and you must sleep separately.**

- If you usually meet your sex partners **online or are a sex worker**, consider taking a break from in-person dates. Video dates, phone sex, sexting or chat rooms may be sustainable and fulfilling options for you. Take care to not leave yourself open to fraud or blackmail when working online.
- **If you are under the age of 18**, avoid engaging in any online sexual activity, because there are significant risks in people trying to harm you, steal your images and pretend to be someone they are not. Don't arrange to meet someone whom you chat to online face to face, as not only will this be a potential COVID-19 risk, but your personal safety may be compromised. There are many options for reporting abuse online if you are worried. You can either do this yourself or an adult can help you.
- Some useful places to **access age appropriate information** include:
  - ❖ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>
  - ❖ <https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>
- If you decide to **have sex outside of your household or support bubble** -
  - ❖ Monitor yourself for symptoms
  - ❖ Stick to one regular sex partner
  - ❖ Be extra vigilant if you are over 65 and with others over 65 or those with serious medical conditions.<sup>5</sup>
  - ❖ Use face coverings and good hand hygiene to minimise spread to others.
  - ❖ Practice social distancing as much as possible
  - ❖ If you develop any COVID-19 symptoms inform your sexual partner(s) so that they can be aware of the need to monitor themselves and self-isolate.

### How can I make sex safer?

- **If you are going to have sex with a partner outside your household and bubble, you can reduce the harm to yourself and your partners. Have a conversation about COVID-19 risk factors before you hook up, as you would about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) [For more information about PrEP click here](#) or condom use.**
  - ❖ **Condoms and dental dams can reduce contact** with sperm ("cum"), saliva ("spit") and faeces ("poo"), especially during oral and anal sex.
  - ❖ **Kissing passes on COVID-19.** Avoid kissing anyone who is not part of your household or support bubble.
  - ❖ **Rimming (mouth on anus) is very likely to spread COVID-19** as the virus in faeces can enter your mouth so you should avoid it during this time.<sup>6</sup>
  - ❖ **Wear a face covering or a mask.** A face covering that covers your nose and mouth adds a layer of protection during sex. Heavy breathing can spread the virus further, and if you or your partner have COVID-19 and don't know it, a mask may help stop that spread.
  - ❖ **Masturbate together.** Face coverings and physical distance can help reduce the risk.

- ❖ **Washing before and after sex is essential.** Wash your hands and sex toys with soap and warm water. Reduce the risk of spread by not sharing sex toys at this time.

### **Can I hook up freely if my COVID-19 test is positive? No.**

- ❖ A positive antibody test (blood) for the virus that causes COVID-19 may indicate prior exposure, but it does not guarantee immunity from re-infection. The recommendation is still to follow government guidance regarding social distancing.
- ❖ A positive diagnostic antigen test (nose or throat swab) means you have the virus now and could very likely pass it on. You should self-isolate for 10 days but everyone in your bubble must self-isolate for 14 days.<sup>7</sup>
- ❖ You should still take the recommended precautions even if you or anyone in your household or support bubble has had a positive antibody test or previously tested positive on the diagnostic test. Re-infection may still be possible.

### **What if I have sexual health symptoms or need an STI test?**

Sexual health and contraceptive services are dealing with the most urgent and serious cases as a priority. Many clinics are running limited services in order to stick to the recommended physical distancing measures and will only be able to see patients who have urgent sexual health-related problems. Some are now undertaking telephone, video consultations and postal testing and treatment, please ask your service what is offered.

- **Preventing HIV:** If you've been at risk within the last 72 hours, you might be able to prevent HIV infection by taking PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis), ideally within 24 hours of the risk, and no later than 72 hours. You can get PEP from a sexual health clinic or hospital A&E department. A doctor will advise you if PEP is suitable for you based on the level of risk. [For more information about PEP, click here.](#)
- **Testing and treatment for STIs:** If you need an STI test, it may not be possible to attend a sexual health clinic. If you have symptoms of an STI, you should phone your local clinic and they will tell you what you should do. Screening and testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can be performed using a home test kit or ordered online (if your local clinic offers this).
- **Contraception:** Make sure you have an effective form of contraception for the coming months. Your local clinics should have a telephone service set up to advise you further on the best contraceptive choice for you.
- **Abortion:** Services are still being provided but a move to video or telephone clinics is happening to minimise contact and risk of COVID-19. Arrangements for treatment and post abortion care will vary across the country. <https://www.fsrh.org/fsrh-and-covid-19-resources-and-information-for-srh/>

To find your nearest sexual health service: [Click here for Scotland.](#) [Click here for England.](#) [Click here for Wales.](#)

### **How can I maintain social contact and wellbeing whilst physically distancing?**

During this difficult time where many of our lives have changed a great deal, it is important to check in with ourselves and maintain social interaction in a safe but fulfilling way. Support networks from friends and loved ones can be a great source of protection for wellbeing and mental health.

- **Do something good in your community** by helping out from a safe distance with the mutual aid of neighbourhood groups and community (check social media) those who might be self-isolating and need your help. Lots of organisations need volunteers, from phone befriending isolated people, ambulance brigade, HIV charities, food banks, pet fostering and more. A lot of this can be done from home too.

- **Try a new activity:** Virtual pub quizzes online, phone chats, gaming, reading, learning a new language or an online exercise class.

### What about HIV and COVID-19?

- **If you are HIV negative to prevent getting HIV:**
  - ❖ Having sex with partners who **have HIV and an undetectable viral load** means there is no way of transmitting HIV but you can still catch other STIs or get pregnant, so condom use and additional contraception is advised. [Check out U=U website here.](#)
  - ❖ **Pre- exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), as described above, is another option to prevent HIV.<sup>8</sup>** It is available for free in Scotland or you can buy it online relatively inexpensively but you should have an HIV test (available online) before starting. To learn how to buy PrEP online and start safely – [check out PrEPsters website here.](#) Sex with partners who are not already part of your household or support bubble should be avoided as you should be avoiding non-essential travel and keeping 2 metres apart.
- **If you are living with HIV during COVID-19:**
  - ❖ Your local clinic will have made arrangements to ensure your medication supply is available either to be delivered to you (with your permission) or for you (or a designated person) to collect on your behalf. ***Your local clinic will contact you closer to the time of your appointment.***
  - ❖ You are not at increased risk because of your HIV diagnosis **unless** you are not taking medication for HIV but you should follow physical distancing precautions.<sup>9</sup> If you are not taking medication for HIV and would like to start then please contact your local service.
  - ❖ If you have a CD4 Count of between 50 and 200 you are considered vulnerable and at a higher risk of severe illness, so you should follow physical distancing precautions.
  - ❖ If you have a CD4 count of less than 50 then you are considered very vulnerable. You should shield as per government guidance.<sup>10</sup>
  - ❖ [Check out this helpful resource.](#)

### **The person I live with or a person in a support bubble is abusing me: What can I do?**

- It has been very well publicised in the media that, since the start of lockdown, there has been a significant rise in reports of domestic abuse to the police and specialist agencies across the UK. There has been a rise in abuse from intimate partners and within families.
- **Abuse is never your fault.**
- Call Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline for free and confidential advice, 24 hours a day on 0808 2000 247. Visit the helpline website to access further information, a contact form and the live chat service.
- **If you feel immediately unsafe, or you are worried about the safety of a child/children at home or there is another adult at risk in the household dial 999 and ask for the police. If you feel afraid of being heard after dialling 999, stay silent, press 55 and you will be transferred to the police.<sup>11</sup>**
- Click here for some further advice: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help?gclid=Clu13bnJ2eoCFUuDhQodlZcjfg&gclidsrc=ds>

### If I've been raped or sexually attacked who can help me?

It can be hard to make sense of what has happened. **Remember: if it wasn't your choice, you haven't given consent.**

- For advice, [call your local Sexual Assault Referral](#) centre (SARC). They will listen to you and offer you help, including treatment and support, and make it easier for you to work out what you want to do.
- You don't have to involve the police if you don't want to. But if you want police advice, you [can call them directly](#). You can also speak to a specialist officer anonymously.
- **The law says :**
  - ❖ Rape and sexual assault can happen to anyone – regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity.
  - ❖ Rape is when someone puts their penis into (penetrates) the vagina, anus or mouth of another person without their consent.
  - ❖ Assault by penetration is when someone puts another part of their body – or an object – into another person's vagina or anus without that person's consent.
  - ❖ Sexual assault is when someone touches another person in a sexual way, without that person's consent.
- **If you have been raped or sexually assaulted find a local service here:** <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/rsa/rape-and-sexual-assault/support-for-victims-of-rape-and-sexual-assault/>
- **Emotional support can be sought at any time by contacting the Rape Crisis Centre as follows:**
  - ❖ **England and Wales:** <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/>
  - ❖ **Scotland:** <https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/>
  - ❖ **Ireland:** <https://www.rcni.ie/>

### **Other support**

- British Association of Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) - <https://www.bashh.org/pils>
- British HIV Association (BHIVA) - <https://www.bhiva.org/patient-specific>
- HIV Scotland Helpline is live between 10am - 6pm, Monday to Friday. Dial 0131 558 3713.
- THT advice number is 0808 802 1221. <https://www.tht.org.uk/news/coronavirus-covid-19>
- Ask Brook text service 07717 989 023 (Standard SMS rate) or use web chat by going [Here](#)
- CALM call 0800 58 58 58 / webchat <https://www.thecalmzone.net/>
- Domestic violence help: 0808 2000 247 <https://www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/>
- LGBT Switchboard: call 0300 330 0630 / online chat / <https://switchboard.lgbt/>
- LGBT+ anti violence help <http://www.galop.org.uk/>

### **Article sources:**

(1) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing>

(2) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/meeting-people-from-outside-your-household>

(3) NYC Health Department <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-sex-guidance.pdf>

(4) Niedrig M, Patel P, El wahed AA, Schädler R, Yactayo S. Find the right sample: A study on the versatility of saliva and urine samples for the diagnosis of emerging viruses. BMC Infect Dis. 2018;18(1):707. doi: 10.1186/s12879-018-3611-x

(5) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

(6) [Yeo C, Kaushal S, Yeo D Enteric involvement of coronaviruses: is faecal–oral transmission of SARS-CoV-2 possible?.Lancet Gastroenterol Hepatol. 2020; \(published online Feb 19.\) https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-1253\(20\)30048-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-1253(20)30048-0)

(7) <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing-and-tracing/>

(8) <https://www.hiv.scot/Pages/FAQs/Category/prep-coronavirus>

(9) <https://www.bhiva.org/coronavirus-and-HIV-responses-to-common-questions-from-BHIVA>

(10) <https://www.bhiva.org/updated-government-guidance-on-22-June>

(11) <https://members.bashh.org/Documents/COVID-19/Immediate%20safety%20planning%20for%20DA%20survivors%20during%20Covid%2019%20pandemic%20BASHH%20SV%20SIG%20March%202020.pdf>

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