



the facts:
navigating life



headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

understanding sex and sexual health

Am I ready for sex?

If you're thinking about having sex you might feel nervous or excited. Even if it's not your first time, it's normal to experience a range of emotions.

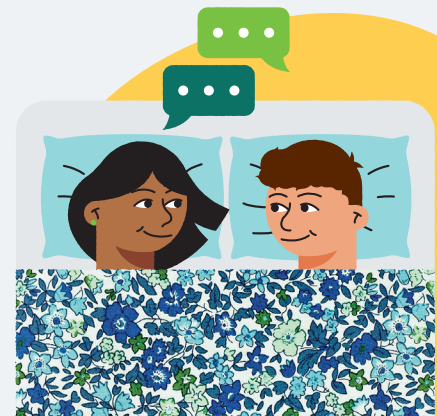
It's important that you feel confident and ready, so it might be helpful to ask yourself these questions:

- am I doing this because I want to?
- do I feel safe and respected?
- do I feel comfortable talking about sex, sexual health and contraception?
- do I feel comfortable having sex with someone not under the influence of alcohol or other drugs?
- do I know how to have sex safely?
- what is the law about sex in my state? (Check out Youth Law Australia – yla.org.au)
- have I discussed safe sex with my partner/s?

What is sexual consent?

Sexual consent is an ongoing and freely given agreement between people who are engaging in sexual activity together.

- Consent to any sexual act needs to be stated clearly – don't just assume they're into it.
- Setting physical/sexual boundaries means continuously checking in with each other about what is and isn't OK. If someone consents to one sexual act, it doesn't mean they consent to another. Ongoing communication is one of the key steps to consent.
- People can change their minds anytime. If you feel uncomfortable at any stage, it's perfectly OK to let the other person know that you want to slow down or stop.
- Alcohol and other drugs can impact our ability to give consent, say no to sexual activity or recognise when someone isn't giving consent. It can be helpful to limit alcohol and other drug use before sexual activity.
- Discussing and agreeing on contraception and actions to prevent sexually transmitted infections is another way you can practise consent.
- The age that someone can consent to any kind of sexual activity varies slightly between states and territories in Australia. Check out Youth Law Australia for more information about the age of consent in your state and territory.



What is sexual health?

Good sexual health requires a respectful and positive attitude around the decisions you make about sexual activity. It's also about having the right information so you can enjoy yourself and help prevent things like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies.

What is sexuality?

For many people, sexuality is an important part of who we are, what we feel and how we respond to others. It's about how we see our identity and express ourselves romantically and sexually. It's important to remember that your identity is your right. The way you want to describe it, and who you share that with, is completely up to you.

A person may identify as:

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

If you have any questions about your sexuality you might like to talk to someone you trust, like a friend, family member, Elder, teacher or counsellor.



What are Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)?

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

Some STIs include:

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

Some symptoms of STIs include:

- unusual and/or smelly discharge
- pain during urination/sex
- sores, blisters, ulcers, warts or rashes
- pain in the scrotum or testicles
- some STIs can lead to infertility if left untreated.

Other times, signs or symptoms of having an STI are not obvious – a person can have an STI without knowing it. The best way to detect an STI is to get tested. This can be done through a doctor or at a sexual health clinic.

Using barrier protection like condoms, diaphragms and dental dams are methods that can reduce the risk of most STIs, but they need to be used correctly.

Being able to communicate openly about sexual health stuff is important.

For more on STIs, check out HealthDirect's articles (healthdirect.gov.au).



Check out the headspace website for more information about sex and relationships.

Practising safe sex

Practising safe sex decreases our chances of being exposed to an STI. Remember though, 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. Some headspace centres have GPs – check with yours.

Contraception

There are different forms of contraception, that when used properly, can be very effective at preventing unwanted pregnancy.

Types of contraception include:

- contraceptive pill
- condoms
- diaphragms
- contraceptive injections
- contraceptive implants (e.g., Implanon, IUD)

There are other forms of contraception. Speak to your GP or trusted medical professional about these options.

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 unplanned pregnancy.

If you're worried you may be pregnant, because you recently had unprotected sex, you can speak to a chemist/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 every 6–12 months, when you change partners, or when you show symptoms. This can be done as part of a routine visit to the general practitioner (GP), a sexual health clinic, 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 friend, family member, Elder, teacher or counsellor.

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



Talking to your partner/s about sexual health

This is a really important step in looking after your sexual health.

Discuss 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.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school, TAFE 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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