

**If you're talking
to clients
about condoms,**

**here's a few
pillow talk
tips.**

Professionals will be able to use the information on this briefing and supporting web-based information to conduct sessions on condom use with clients. **fpa's** Pillow talk tips leaflet, Male and female condom leaflet and condom size chart are all available on the Sexual Health Week page on **fpa's** website www.fpa.org.uk.

- Health care professionals have a vital role to play in enabling clients to use condoms effectively and improve their experience of the method.
- Clients, for a variety of reasons, may feel uncomfortable talking about condom use with their partners (see **fpa's** Pillow talk tips leaflet).
- Fears from men about the impact of condoms on sexual performance/sexual dysfunction can affect use.
- Good consistent use of condoms requires that users understand what may make the condom fail, and how to get help if it does.
- Research shows that condom failure is a complex issue.

There are many reasons for condom failure:

- the type of condom used.
- size of condom.
- inexperience of user.
- vaginal dryness.
- use of extra lubrication.
- practical difficulties with use.

Health care professionals can dispel some of the misconceptions that surround and prevent good condom use. Using the correct size and shape of condom provides users with a better experience through improved comfort and fit, as well as reducing condom failure.

When discussing or issuing male condoms to clients it is useful to check:

- that they know that condoms come in different shapes and sizes.
- that previous experience of condom use was positive.
- that they have the confidence or language to discuss any problems they may be having with condoms.
- that they can read and understand the instructions provided by manufacturers and public information leaflets.
- that they know how to put a condom on.
- that they know where to get condoms from.
- that they know they can get a free supply from various NHS services.
- that women will be able to influence their partner's use of condoms.

Direct questions about specific aspects of condom use should elicit any potential or real problems being experienced. The following questions and points are the ones most frequently discussed by **fpa's** helpline advisors with callers who use condoms:



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Q. 'Do the condoms you use feel too tight/loose/short for you or your partner?'

- Condoms come in a range of sizes to suit different penis sizes. They vary in length, width and shape. Some are straight while others are flared for a looser fit or shaped to fit more snugly.
- Information about condom dimensions can be accessed from manufacturers' charts, condom websites and sometimes on condom packets.
- Different sizes and shapes may need to be tried before finding one that is comfortable, and men can be advised to try them on their own before using them with a partner where possible.
- Many people feel too embarrassed to browse the condom shelf in a shop. Internet sites are listed on **fpa's** website www.fpa.org.uk.

Q. 'Are there any problems with putting the condom on?'

Practice is the key to successful condom use but a few things can make it easier:

- Ensure the penis is as erect as possible. Extra stimulation before putting the condom on may help.
- Have a condom immediately available.
- Sharp fingernails, teeth and jewellery can tear the condom.
- Holding the teat or closed end gets rid of air and helps ensure it is put on the right way round.
- If it's a struggle to get the condom on, or it keeps slipping off, a different size or shape may be needed.

Q. 'Do condoms ever come off/slip/tear or break when you are having sex?'

- Extra lubrication may increase the risk of slippage for vaginal sex if there is no problem with sexual arousal. However, it may help to reduce breakage if used for anal sex where there is less natural lubrication.
- If latex condoms are being used, care should be taken not to use oil-based lubricants including body oil, lipstick and lotions as they can damage the latex, making it more likely for the condom to split.
- Penis size does not seem to impact on condom slippage; yet if a condom feels very tight around the penis it may indicate that the condom is more likely to break.
- Research shows that non-latex condoms may split more often than latex ones.

Q. 'Do condoms interfere with sexual performance/increase problems with maintaining an erection/vaginal lubrication/sensitivity?'

- Men, especially young men, can feel anxious about condoms affecting sexual performance and the fear of losing an erection. This can lead to acute embarrassment resulting in condoms not being used.
- Encourage the client to practice using/ejaculating into condoms without penetrative sex to improve confidence and use of condoms. Performance-enhancing condoms are also available.
- Some women can find condoms make sex less enjoyable and/or uncomfortable. Vaginal irritation can result from not being sufficiently aroused. Lubricant can be helpful in this instance.
- The size and shape of the condom can affect some men's comfort.
- Irritation can be caused by sensitivity to latex. A true latex allergy is rare, but using polyurethane condoms can resolve this problem.
- Spermicide can be an irritant to both men and women. Condoms lubricated with spermicide (Nonoxinol 9) are no longer recommended as there is evidence that spermicide may increase the risk of sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Q. 'As a professional how do I discuss such a sensitive subject with clients?'

- Are you comfortable discussing condom use with clients? If not refer on to another identified colleague.
- Prepare all materials, try a session out on colleagues first before you start with clients.
- Ensure you have available teaching aids (condom demonstrators, varieties of condoms, **fpa** leaflets), to support the consultation.
- Talk with confidence and sensitivity. Sexual health issues can cause embarrassment and anxiety to both professionals and clients.
- Disclosure issues may arise in the consultation session. Know who to refer clients on to.
- Use **fpa's** helpline who can provide advice and information to professionals undertaking this work.



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