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TALKING TO CLIENTS ABOUT USING CONDOMS

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- Health care professionals have a vital role to play in enabling clients to use condoms effectively and improve their experience of the method.
- 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 patient 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 partners' 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:

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. Some advice is provided with this briefing to illustrate the different types available.
- 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 but the websites listed at the end provide information that can be viewed privately.

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 rings 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. 'Does the condom cause any discomfort/irritation to you or your partner?'

- The size and shape of 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 are no longer recommended as there is evidence that spermicide may increase the risk of sexually transmitted infections including HIV.
- Vaginal irritation can result from not being sufficiently aroused. There may be some anxiety about using condoms, trusting a new partner, not liking the sensation or simply too little time spent on foreplay.
- Additional lubricant can be useful in some instances.

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 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 split more often than latex ones, it appears that in experienced condom users, failure is comparable between non-latex and latex versions.

LARGER SIZES

Avanti (Durex)	Straight, length 180mm, wide at 64mm
Visage (Confident)	Straight, long at 206mm, 52mm wide
easy-onq(Durex)*	Shaped, long at 205mm
Comfort (Durex)	Flared, long at 205mm, 63mm wide at head
Large (Mates)	Shaped, length 180mm, 65mm wide at teat end
XXL (Condomi)	Straight, length 200mm, 54 mm wide
Large (Pasante)	Straight, length 180mm, 55 mm wide
Max XL (Safex)	Flared, length 195mm, 58mm wide
Ex Large (Condomania)	Straight, length 180mm, 54 mm wide

* Performa, Extra Safe, Fetherlite, Gossamer and Elite - collectively called the easy-onq range - are flared in shape for improved comfort and ease of use.

SMALLER SIZES

Conform (Mates)	Shaped, length 160mm, 49mm wide
Trim (Pasante)	Straight, length 180mm, 49mm wide
Close-fit (Durex)	Straight, length 178mm, 49mm wide
Snug fit (exs)	Straight, length 186mm, 49mm wide

NON-LATEX

Avanti (Durex)	Length 180mm x 64mm wide, unaffected by oil-based lubricants
Unique (Pasante)	Adheres to skin, very thin
Femidom	Female condom

'EJACULATION DELAYERS'

Performa (Durex)	5% Benzocaine* in teat. Length 205mm, 63mm wide
Max. love (Condomi)	5% Benzocaine added to lubricant inside condom. Length 185mm, 52mm wide
Delay (Safex)	5% Benzocaine activated by body temperature. Length 185mm, 52mm wide

* Benzocaine is a low potency local anaesthetic, used in throat lozenges and mouth ulcer preparations, it temporarily desensitises the nerve endings of the penis.

HEIGHTENED STIMULATION*

Tingle (Durex)	Shaped, long at 205mm, 63mm wide at head, contains a special lubricant which creates a gentle tingling sensation for both partners.
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* All brands now have at least one style of condom in their range that is ribbed, dotted or studded - sometimes collectively called textured condoms.

All brands have a range of flavoured or unlubricated condoms recommended for oral sex. Details of all of the listed condoms are available from one or more of the following organisations:

- www.britishcondoms.com
- www.fpsales.co.uk
- www.durbin.co.uk