Condoms - Thin, Thick or Thicker – What’s best for me?!

Condoms are a very effective barrier to many Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) including HIV and they are also a good way to prevent pregnancy when they are used correctly, although some other contraception methods are more reliable for preventing pregnancy. Some people worry about condoms use because of their ‘Failure Rate’. This is often measured by how often condoms fail at preventing a pregnancy and sometimes how often condoms break or slip off during sex.

How many people use condoms?

Many Gay, Straight and Bisexual people use condoms at least some of the time. In terms of Black African communities a fairly recent study identified that about three quarters of those who had had sex in the last year used condoms at least once. Just over two in five people used a condom every single time that they had sex. For Gay, Bisexual and men who have sex with men who are sexually active about eight out of ten wore a condom at least once in the last year.

That’s a lot of condoms!

Condoms are big business and that is why there is such a wide market, very often latex condoms that are vastly different in price are in fact virtually the same product. On sale in the UK there are seven major condom brands and each of those have over ten different condoms in their range and over 400 different names on sale. The Male condom is by far the most common condom; some people call the Femidom the female condom. In addition to latex condoms there are non-latex condoms which can be used by those with a latex allergy.

The rest of the brands have different names because of design and size. Some have flared ends (wider at the end), some have ribs on them (some consider they add pleasure) and others have spermicide (to kill sperm and prevent pregnancy), lube (to make it easier to penetrate) and others even have preparations for extra sensitivity (for added pleasure) or to numb the penis and vaginal area (some consider makes sex more pleasurable and/or to delay ejaculation).

How do I tell them apart?

**Thickness** – thin, normal and extra thick. Condoms are measured in ‘Microns’. One micron is 0.01mm. That is REALLY thin! An extra thin condom is around 4 microns thick, an average condom is around 7 microns thick and an extra thick condom is around 9 microns thick. Because the penis is very sensitive, some people say that they can feel the difference between an average and a thick condom.

**Size** – small, medium, large or extra large. These don’t actually mean anything about the size of your penis so this description can be deceptive. The size mainly refers to the width of the condom with some slight differences in length.

Some guys have a very long penis (5-7 inches when erect is an average size, so anything above is bigger than average). Many are thinner and snug fit or small condoms are also available. Other guys might have a short penis (less than 5 inches) but it may be quite thick, so some use a large condom. The most important thing is that you use the condom that is right for you – some try different ones to see which is best for you!

Is Extra Thick, Extra Strong?

The simple answer is NO. Research on both thick and thinner condoms show similar breakage rates. Most research into condom ‘failure’ has blamed human error for them breaking, but then the reality is that we don’t have sex in a clinical setting and mistakes are bound to happen. This can be because there is not enough lubrication, the condom was damaged before it was put on the penis or even during sex, the wrong size of condom was used and/or the wrong type of lubricant was used – oil based lubricants can weaken latex condoms causing them to break.

A major piece of research into nearly a thousand broken condoms found that on inspection, the single reason that most condoms broke was due to the condom not being on properly and the penis repeatedly pushing against the middle wall of the condom leading to it breaking. Therefore, when putting on a condom it is important that the end of the penis is at the end of the condom and that the condom is secure (i.e. it can’t slip off easily).

Even extra thin condoms (around 4 microns) have a great deal of strength in them. Therefore it isn’t necessary to use extra thick condoms for vaginal or anal sex. Any condom is better than no condom.

**Top tip for talking about condoms use with health or support workers**

1. Be honest – We know it’s hard sometimes to talk about sex but we can’t support you properly if we don’t know what the issues are for you and remember workers are not there to judge you.
Top tip for successful condom use

2. Find a condom and lubricant that you like the feel of and have them close by, condoms are often not used because they are not available or close by when we are about to have sex.

Top tips for worker talking about sex

1. Don’t prescribe “use condoms all the time” the fact is that most people don’t use condoms 100% of the time and if you “prescribe” you may just be told what you want to hear. Help people tell you about condoms by providing choices e.g. ask ‘Do you manage to use condoms never, some of the time or all of the time?’.

2. Do not use the ‘condoms fit all sizes’ line. The fact is that different condoms feel very different to some people and they can cause erection loss. Be open to finding a solution with people who have problems using condoms including seeking outside support. The main issue often seems to be that men can feel that they lose some sensation or intimacy.

The Brunswick Centre has a confidential condoms and lube by post scheme available to men who have sex with men, Black Africans and people living with HIV in Calderdale and Kirklees. Our workers are knowledgable about condoms and you can ask them questions in confidence. You can also access condoms by post if you live in Kirklees and Calderdale, just simply text your name and address to 07874 643 429 or email to condomsbypost@thebrunswickcentre.org.uk. We stock a wide range of condoms.

References


