

COVID and Sexual Health

Information sheet by AIDS Concern

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COVID-19 is affecting many aspects of our lives. How about your sex life?

Background

AIDS Concern is a sex positive organization. We are committed to helping everybody stay as safe as possible – it is better that people have safer sex to also reduce their risk of STI/HIV. If you are having sex, it's best to limit your pool of sexual partners as much as possible. Sex with yourself is the safest option, but if that is not possible then limiting sex partners within your household is the next best option!

Based on current evidence, coronaviruses - the virus family that causes COVID-19 illness - **are unlikely to be passed on through vaginal or anal sex**. However, the virus is passed on through close contact with droplets from the nose and mouth, including the saliva from an infected person. As the risk of getting COVID-19 significantly increases for people who are within 1 metre of each other, activities like kissing and physical touching are high risk.

We have reviewed the World Health Organisation, government guidelines, other overseas NGOs' recommendations, and peer review articles. Here, we summarize this information to provide advice to Hong Kong people.

Objectives

- To identify the potential risks of COVID-19 infection during sex.
- To point out the necessary and important preparations and actions before sex, during sex and after sex to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection.
- To give the public useful resources to continue maintaining good sexual health.

Pre- sex

As social distancing recommendations continue, it is important for some people to consider adjusting sexual practice to balance physical health, social health and sexual desire **before** engaging in any sexual act.

Sexual transmission for COVID-19 through sex seems unlikely, based on current evidence from other coronaviruses. However, there is preliminary evidence it may be transmitted through the oral-fecal route (from poo) but that is not confirmed. Limiting any droplet (mouth or nose)/contact transmission should be the main focus of prevention as well as reducing any potential oral-fecal transmission.

Reducing your risk of COVID-19 infection through sexual contact

1. Do an initial screening

- If you or your sexual partner(s) have displayed symptoms of COVID-19 in the last 14 days – a dry persistent cough, temperature, loss of smell/taste or difficulty in breathing – you should limit all close physical contact to stop the spread of the virus. This means avoiding physical intimacy, such as kissing and cuddling, as well as anal, vaginal, or oral sex.
- Ask your sex partner(s) if they have close contact with any infected person (COVID-19) in the last 14 days.

- If booking a hotel/motel is considered, please check if any of the COVID-19 confirmed cases visited such venues in the past 14 days.

2. Having sex only with people who you live with is highly recommended

- If you live in the same household as your regular sexual partner(s) and you both have no symptoms, then continue having sex as normal for your relationship.
- If your partner(s) works in a job where there's a high risk of catching the virus, e.g. healthcare worker, you and your partner should discuss what you are both comfortable with; some people practice good hand hygiene and have a separate set of clothing dedicated for work.

3. Having sex with people you don't live with (regular partners are the best options)! This is higher risk for Covid-19 and AIDS Concern advises against it at the current time to reduce your risk of COVID-19. However, if you choose to have sex with people you don't live with. There are ways to reduce the risk.

- Consider wearing a face mask or covering. We realise wearing a mask for sex may not be realistic for some people.
- Use condoms or dental dams.
- Discuss with your sex partner(s) about the use of face mask, condom or dental dam to reduce contact with saliva.
- Discuss with your sex partner about precautions. Some intimate behaviours are at higher risks than others (please refer to the During sex guideline below).

4. Washing up before sex (including masturbation with sex toys)

- Take shower and wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Wash sex toys with soap and warm water
- Clean the room with disinfectants and alcohol wipes

5. Engage in sexual activity on digital devices as an alternative

- Be aware of screenshots of conversations, video recording and sexual extortion.
- Establish boundaries and ensure mutual consent is formed so that permission/disapproval of certain actions e.g. recording, screen capture, are clear.

During sex

It is important to continue maintaining safer sex practices, just as before, especially if you have sexual partners outside your home.

There are a few cases where the virus was found in the semen of COVID-19-infected patients. The viruses were found in anal swabs, urine/fecal samples, but it is unclear if those bodily substances can transmit the disease or is a part of the virus leaving the body (i.e. viral shedding). **It is best to be on the cautious side and limit the exchange of bodily fluids.**

- Use barrier methods during oral sex, **especially with non-regular partners**, as the virus can be transmitted through saliva, and respiratory droplets, and mucus. Condoms for blowjobs and dental dams/latex gloves can be used for other types of oral play such as rimming or cunnilingus. Remember to check the condom's expiry date and use non-powdered gloves.
- If you are sharing sex toys, consider putting a condom on sex toys before using it.
- Consider reducing the contact of oral and/or anal play as the virus can be present in the gastrointestinal system; highly suggest using condoms if there is penetration. Consider sexual positions that reduce face-to-face interactions e.g. doggystyle or use sex toys instead.

- Have sex in a well-ventilated room- crack open a window.
- If face masks are used (especially with non-regular partners), please be aware they may lose their protective qualities once they are wet.
- Think of other sexual activities that limit direct contact e.g. mutual masturbation, sexting, phone sex, or video sex/camming.
- Please take privacy and potential scams in mind. Consider having identifying items outside of screenshot e.g. name or work-related clothes. Unless the sex partner(s) is trusted, consider not showing your face.
- Always remember, if you are uncomfortable with any request or actions during phone/video/camera sex, you should tell your partner(s) to stop, or at least take a break.

Post-sex

After sex, it is likely that you and your partner(s) just want to laze around or fall asleep but be cautious of the hygiene standards. Some actions immediately afterwards can keep troubles away. Here are a few tips everyone should follow to prevent infections:

1. Wash your hands because hands are full of germs

- Ensure that they are clean and washed after sex. Give your hands another scrubbing after sex, including finger tips, between fingers, and wrists for 20 seconds.

2. Clean-up your private parts

- Washing your private parts after sex is very important. To stop germs from spreading, health experts specifically suggest properly cleansing underneath the penis foreskin and peeing after sex.

3. Keep the clean-up simple

- Instead of opting for lotions and perfumes, keep it simple by just having a gentle rinse with warm water after sex and use plain soap for the outer genital regions.
- Harsh soaps, detergents, perfumes, alcohol sanitizers, scented tampons, etc. can irritate the delicate skin and increase the risk of infections. A gentle rinse with warm water after sex is enough; no cleansing products should go inside the vagina, penis, or anus.

4. Monitor your symptoms after the sexual encounter

- If there are signs of fever, loss of smell or taste, or flu-like symptoms, consider visiting a doctor to get a COVID-19 test, especially within 5-7 days of having sex.

5. Stay home, get rest and keep calm

- If you are currently waiting for COVID-19 results, DO NOT go to other health clinics, including HIV testing, until after your COVID-19 results.

Resources

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some sexual health services may be disrupted. It includes services for family planning, contraception, sexual health testing and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

To limit the spread of the virus, many government clinics may suspend walk-in services, move to online consultations, reduce hours, close or refer clients elsewhere. It is important to stay up-to-date with your local health providers by checking their websites or giving them a call.

Hong Kong SHC's website:

https://www.dh.gov.hk/tc_chi/tele/tele_chc/tele_chc_shcm.html

The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong (FPAHK)

<https://www.famplan.org.hk/zh>

Rainlily, Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women (ACSVAW)

<https://rainlily.org.hk>

PrEP

Preventing HIV is still important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Make sure you have an adequate supply of condoms, and at least 30 days' worth of PrEP, if you currently taking PrEP. Some people on PrEP may decide to change their PrEP regimen from daily to on-demand based on having less sex; please consult a health professional if you have any questions about switching regimens. If you decide to stop taking PrEP, make sure you know how to stop it and start it again.

Hong Kong PrEP info

<https://aidsconcern.org.hk/zh/help-and-support/prevention/prep/>

HIV Self-Testing

Although walk-in clinic and some testing center is closed, you can still do your own HIV self-testing if you pass the 90-days window period. It is easy, convenient and safe.

My Self-test

https://aidsconcern.org.hk/en/testing-service/self_testing-2/

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Top safe sex tips during COVID

It is all about maintaining your usual safer sex practices, but with a twist!

The virus is known to be infectious in **respiratory fluids** (e.g. saliva and mucus). It has also been found in the **gastrointestinal tract** (e.g. faeces, urine, and anal swabs) and **semen** (of infected patients; not recovered) but transmission through those fluids have not been confirmed.

Before sex

- 1. Do an initial screening for yourself and your sexual partner(s),**
physical intimacy should be avoided if you or your sexual partner(s):
 - Have displayed symptoms of COVID-19 in the last 14 days
 - Have close contact with any infected person (COVID-19) in the last 14 days
- 2. Having sex only with people who you live with is highly recommended,**
if that is not possible, you may discuss with your sexual partner(s) about good hygiene practice:
 - Discuss whether face coverings, condoms, etc. will be used
 - Talk about whether it is okay to record/screencap virtual meet-ups
- 3. Hygiene before sex**
 - Take shower and wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
 - Wash sex toys with soap and warm water
 - Clean the room with disinfectants and alcohol wipes

Engaging in sexual activity on digital devices could be a good alternative, **but be aware of the risk of screenshots of conversations and video recording for sexual extortion.**

During sex

- 1. Use protection to limit the spread of droplets and bodily fluids**
 - Condoms for penetrative sex and blowjobs
 - Dental dams for rimming or cunnilingus
 - Gloves (non-powder) for fingering
- 2. Limit oral and/or anal play**
As the virus can be present in the gastrointestinal system, consider alternate ways of having fun
 - Sexual positions that reduce face-to-face interactions e.g. doggystyle or reverse cowgirl
 - Using sex toys e.g. dildos or vibrators (also wrap a condom around it!)
 - Mutual masturbation
 - Take advantage of technology e.g. sexting, phone sex, or video sex/camming
 - Consider having identifying items outside of screenshot e.g. name or work-related clothes. Unless the sex partner(s) is trusted, consider not showing your face.)
- 3. Have sex in a well-ventilated room- crack open a window**
- 4. Wear face masks with non-regular partners**
 - please be aware they may lose their protective qualities once they are wet.

After sex

- 1. Wash your hands because hands are full of germs**
 - Ensure that they are clean and washed after sex. Give your hands another scrubbing after sex, including finger tips, between fingers, and wrists for 20 seconds.
- 2. Monitor your symptoms after the sexual encounter**
 - If there are signs of fever, loss of smell or taste, or flu-like symptoms, consider visiting a doctor to get a COVID-19 test, especially within 5-7 days of having sex.

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