

Investing **IN YOUR** SEXUAL Health

By ARIEL E.M. SERVADIO

A little research and some online shopping go a long way

DESPITE WHAT YOU MAY HAVE BEEN TOLD, THERE ARE MORE ASPECTS TO YOUR SEXUAL HEALTH than not contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Yes, feeling healthy sexually does involve regular visits to the doctor, but using products that improve—not inhibit—your sexual desire can benefit your sexual health, too.

No Glove No Love

Condoms can be more than just another barrier method of protection. Condoms can allow you to safely explore new sexual horizons with different colors, flavors and textures that have the potential to take an otherwise normal experience to the next level.

Yes, if you are sexually active, you have to use them: Unless you are 100%, without a doubt certain that you are in a monogamous relationship, your partner has no STIs (and can show you a test to prove it), or pregnancy is not an issue (either because you're in a homosexual relationship, are using another form of contraception, or you *want* to get pregnant), they are a necessity.

"I've diagnosed a 46-year-old grandmother with chlamydia, so condoms aren't just for the young," says Dr. Kate O'Connell, an OB/GYN at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City, and known as just Dr. Kate on Condé Nast's sex blog *Daily Bedpost*. "But you're even more likely to be diagnosed with an STD when you're under the age of 25."

Once you've accepted that, the fun can begin. Taking the time to look into new options and being willing to shell out a little extra cash will allow you to find a condom that can better meet your sexual needs.

Looking beyond the aisles of your local drugstore and venturing into that vast resource known as the Internet for your condom search can help you find great things. There are entire

websites, like SafeSense.com and Condomania.com, devoted to all of the different kinds of condoms that are out there. SafeSense and Condomania not only allow you to search by brand, but by style, including options like "Thin", "Textured", "Non-latex" and "Female".

Still not sold on the "condoms are a necessity" thing? Looking into one of these websites might lead you to something like the Kimono MicroThin condom, which claims to be the thinnest latex condom on the market in the U.S. Some couples say it feels like not wearing a condom at all; problem solved!

Some additional bonuses offered by sites like these are that they often sell condoms for a cheaper price than you can find in most stores, and they offer condom samplers. If you aren't quite sure what you want, you can buy packs that include condoms of many different styles and brands, and have a whole lot of fun trying them all out.

And for those with latex allergies, there is a now a better option than lambskin condoms (which, for the record, do not prevent STI transmission anyway): polyurethane.

Look for brands like Trojan Supra and Durex Avanti SuperThin.

Some people choose polyurethane condoms over latex regardless of allergies. "Many find them more pleasurable because they're thinner and conduct heat better," says Dr. Kate.

Female condoms are also made of polyurethane, and while not as popular as the male version, they can be a good alternative in relationships where women want to give the condom wearing a shot.

Speaking of females, for those in lesbian relationships, dental dams are an excellent way to prevent transmission of STIs through oral sex. You can either purchase actual dental dams (squares of latex in a n y

Condoms can cost you less cash online.

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color and flavor varieties, kind of like condoms), or make your own by cutting a male condom up one side.

Avoid condoms with spermicide! If you've ever used a condom with spermicide and it ended up being very uncomfortable for the female involved, there's a good reason why: nonoxynol-9.

Emma Taylor and Lorelei Sharkey, better known as Em & Lo, authors of many sex-related books including "The Big Bang: *Nerve's Guide to the New Sexual Universe*", and sex bloggers at DailyBedpost.com, say that "nonoxynol-9, which is condom manufacturers' spermicide of choice, has been shown in some studies to cause vaginal irritation." This can actually increase your chances of contracting HIV and other STIs.

The fact that it could cause you or your partner discomfort (how unsexy is *that*) should be enough reason to nix the spermicide. If it's not, the possibility that it can increase your risk of contracting an STI when you're trying to avoid them, should do it.

If you're in a relationship, the options above are all great ways to keep you safe and healthy while staying sexually satisfied. But what if you're not in a relationship? Or what if you are, but your libidos don't exactly match up?

Self Service

Your sex drive doesn't just vanish with the absence of someone to have sex with. Nobody loves you like you.

Whether you're single, in a relationship, or just like to collect things, the Internet makes it easier and less embarrassing than ever to expand our sexual horizons. As Em & Lo mention in their book "Sex Toy: An A-Z Guide to Bedside Accessories", "You can thank pro-sex feminism, comprehensive sex education, Alfred Kinsey, Ernst Grafenberg (of G-spot fame), Betty Dodson, *Sex and the City*, et al., for contributing to the mainstreaming of sex toys."

Sites like GoodVibrations.com and Babeland.com, which also have brick-and-mortar stores in several locations as well, easily outdo the traditional seedy sex shop on the corner of Ew Avenue

and Don't Go In There Street by providing both a wide range of products that are both male and female-friendly and a whopping dose of knowledge with each one.

Here, too, materials are a big thing to consider. Sticky phthalate-ridden jelly rubber toys are no good for a number of reasons. They're porous and can't be properly sterilized, they reek, and because of the toxic plasticizers in them, they're not safe for skin contact without your favorite barrier method—a good ol' condom.

"The latest studies show that phthalates can interfere with hormones and may reduce sperm count, cause testicular cancer, or counteract breast cancer medicines," say Em & Lo.

While there are lots of safe materials out there that sex toys are made of—metal, hard plastic, and glass included—100% silicone is always a safe (and softer) bet. Silicone toys are non-porous, can be boiled to sterilize, are odorless, very durable, and velvety soft.

They may be significantly pricier than toys made out of jelly rubber, but you get what you pay for, and your health is worth it.

Check It Out

Going to a doctor annually, whether it's one in a specialized field like a gynecologist or urologist, or just a general practitioner, is essential to your sexual health. In addition to testing you for STIs and making sure your sex organs are healthy, your doctor can give you helpful information that can improve your sex life.

"Regular visits *are* important," says Dr. Kate. "It's probably more important to see a gyno once a year than an internist or family doctor, if you're [a woman] under the age of 30 and otherwise healthy. Your gynecologist can discuss contraception, check you for STDs and discuss any sexual issues you have."

Ultimately, your sexual health comes down to *you*. *You* need to do some research, *you* need to spend some money and *you* need to learn to take care of yourself in a way you never may have considered before. It's important that we learn to take our sexual health into our own hands (no pun inte—oh fine, pun definitely intended). ■

STIs and STDs: What's the Difference?

- **STI** = Sexually Transmitted Infection
- **STD** = Sexually Transmitted Disease

STI and STD are often used interchangeably, although that's not always correct. STIs encompass STDs; that is, all viruses, bacterias and parasites that are transmitted through sexual contact or play are infections. They become diseases when symptoms of that infection appear or are felt. So if you're a male with HPV, and have no symptoms (and it's very likely that you wouldn't), you have an STI, not an STD. If you're a woman with HPV and you have genital warts or an abnormal pap smear, congratulations, you've got a bona fide STD.