

Condoms are the most effective tool for preventing the transmission of HIV and STIs. They have been the cornerstone of the public health response to HIV in New Zealand and remain so as we implement a combination HIV prevention approach aiming to end new HIV transmissions by 2025.

The New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF) recommends that condoms are used to prevent the transmission of HIV and other STIs.

+ Strengths

- Correct and consistent condom use prevents the transmission of HIV
- Correct and consistent condom use prevents the transmission of other STIs
- Condoms are cheap and easily available, making them an equitable form of HIV and STI prevention
- Unlike other HIV prevention tools, condoms can be seen in the moment

- Limitations

- Condoms are only effective when used correctly and consistently, with lubricant
- It can be difficult to negotiate condom use with sexual partner(s) every time you have sex
- Condoms can make it difficult for some people to maintain an erection
- For some people condoms can be uncomfortable and decrease sexual pleasure and intimacy

Condoms prevent HIV

Condoms are a physical barrier that prevent the sexual transmission of HIV. Research has shown that consistent condom use significantly reduces the risk of HIV transmission. ^{(1) (2) (3)}

The materials used to make condoms, (latex, nitrile, polyurethane, and polyisoprene), are impermeable to HIV. Condoms act as a barrier to HIV infection by preventing the vulnerable tissues of the vagina, penis, and rectum from being exposed to bodily fluids (such as semen, vaginal fluid, and rectal fluid) which can contain HIV.

Condoms must be used consistently and correctly with lubricant

To prevent the transmission of HIV and STIs, condoms must be used consistently and correctly. This means they are put on correctly at the beginning of a sexual encounter, and used with sufficient lubricant.

Lubricant is especially important for gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men (GBM), as HIV is transmitted most efficiently through receptive anal intercourse. ⁽⁴⁾ Using condoms without lubricant increases friction, putting extra strain on the condom, which may cause it to break. Not using lubricant can also cause trauma in the receptive partner, further increasing the risk of HIV transmission.

Sexual pleasure and sensation can be increased through using the right sized condom and adequate lubricant. This will reduce issues with sensitivity, irritation, erectile dysfunction and the ability to climax.

Water and silicone-based lubricants are safe to use with all condoms. Oil-based lubricants should not be used as they can react with latex and polyisoprene condoms, and increase the risk of condom breakage.

Condoms protect against other STIs

Condoms help to protect against other STIs such as gonorrhoea, chlamydia, herpes, hepatitis and syphilis. Condoms can be used in conjunction with PrEP particularly with new or casual partners or where there is an increased risk of STIs.

Condoms are an effective community response to HIV

Condoms have been the foundation of community-led HIV prevention in New Zealand since the beginning of the epidemic. Condoms interrupt the chain of HIV transmission within sexual networks. Maintaining high rates of condom use by gay and bisexual men provides community-level protection from HIV and most STIs.

Condoms continue to be a highly effective strategy to prevent HIV for the following reasons:

Availability – they can be made easily available to everyone, without a prescription or follow up care through community organisations, pharmacies and health providers, as well as supermarkets, and dairies.

Inexpensive – they are cheaply available to buy, and are often free through sexual health providers, GPs and community organisations like NZAF.

Universal – their effectiveness is not dependent on knowing your own or your partner's HIV and STI status.

Scalable – can be made available to everyone and are an effective population-wide prevention.

Acceptable – condom use among gay and bisexual men in New Zealand has remained very high, with over 80 percent of men reporting high rates of condom use for anal sex with casual partners from 2002-2014. ⁽⁵⁾

Safe – there are no side effects to using condoms (latex allergies can be managed by latex-free condoms) and no risk of HIV developing resistance against condoms.

Maintainable – consistent condom use can be sustained over many years.

Condoms are complementary to all other HIV prevention strategies

Condoms are effective on their own to prevent the transmission of HIV and other STIs. They can also be used alongside other HIV prevention strategies including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and undetectable viral load (UVL).

An enduring and effective public health response to HIV and STIs in New Zealand will require maintaining high rates of condom use for sex among MSM and other key impacted communities.

The New Zealand AIDS Foundation will:

- Champion condoms for HIV and STI prevention and promote their use
- Address barriers to condom uptake
- Distribute free condoms in a range of sizes and with lubricant
- Advocate for condom use as the cornerstone of a combination HIV prevention approach in New Zealand

A combination HIV prevention approach includes:

- Maximising condom use for the prevention of HIV and STIs
- Equitable PrEP uptake among those who need an alternative primary prevention intervention to condoms
- Reducing undiagnosed HIV infection through more timely and widespread testing
- Prompt treatment access and adherence support for PLHIV to maximise their health and maximise the chance of sustained viral suppression, subsequently halting the onward sexual transmission of HIV

References

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