

Common questions about...


SEX AND OTHER STUFF



Sex is often an important and positive part of an intimate relationship, but there's no rush for you to have sex, and it's important to wait until you and your chosen partner both feel physically and emotionally ready. It has to be an agreement between both people, and no one should ever feel forced or pressured into having any kind of sexual activity if they don't want to.

Everyone has the right to enjoy their sexuality and have consensual sex, whatever their sexual orientation, gender identity, HIV status or other differences, including people who have physical or learning disabilities.

Good sex means communicating openly and honestly with your partner about what you like and don't like. It involves asking for, and receiving, consent for sexual activity and means talking about contraception and condoms so that you can be safe and protect against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. It also means protecting your – and your sexual partners' – health by accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services to get the advice, support, and treatment that you need.



Remember, you should never have sex unless you want to. You always have a right to say no at any time – it doesn't matter who the other person is, what your relationship is, or what you've done with them, or others, in the past.



All the questions in this Q&A are based on frequent examples received from young people through UNICEF digital platforms, social listening reports and IoT analytics. The answers were developed in collaboration with a reference group of young people from the ESAR region and reviewed by technical staff from UNICEF, UNFPA and UNAIDS.

1

I want to have sex but I'm worried because it's my first time.



People often wonder what sex will be like the first time and 'losing your virginity' or 'V-card' can feel like a big deal. You might feel it's something you 'need' to do, to keep up with friends, or prove your popularity. But having sex should be fun, exciting and something you feel ready to do, not something to get out of the way or you feel pressured to do. You shouldn't do it just because others have done it, you should only do it because you really want to do it. Remember that it is about you and not what your peers may think of you.

Think about why you want to have sex. Do you feel physically and emotionally ready to be so intimate with your boyfriend or girlfriend? Have you talked about it? Do you feel relaxed, comfortable and safe? If not, take more time, it's not a race and you want it to be a good experience.

If you both feel ready, then it's important to think about how to look after each other – and talking is key to making sure it is a safe and positive experience for you both. This includes talking about consent, boundaries and pleasure, as well as contraception and condoms. You don't want to find yourselves with an STI or unplanned pregnancy.

Remember, there are different types of sex and lots of other ways to be intimate with someone. You don't have to have penetrative sex (putting a penis into a vagina or anus), you can enjoy other things like cuddling, touching and kissing. Some young people prefer to try oral sex (licking or kissing your partner's genitals) before having penetrative sex, that's perfectly ok! But remember that you can still get some STIs from oral sex, so always use condoms (male and female) for oral sex too.



2

How do I know whether someone wants to have sex or not?



The only way to know for sure if someone wants to have sex is to ask them!

Think about what stage you are at with your relationship, how well you know each other, your ages and whether you're ready for that level of intimacy. Are you able to talk about sex? Are you ready to discuss what you like and don't like? If you are, ask them if they are too! Remember you're asking if they're ready and asking for their consent to take it to the next stage.

Consent is a word you may have heard when talking about sex and relationships. It's really important as it's how we communicate with each other, how we check each others' feelings, and it helps us only do what is comfortable for us and for the other person.

Consent is something that you need to ask for, and receive, every time you have any kind of human interaction: for example, many people don't like to be touched by strangers or colleagues and being hugged or patted on the shoulder makes them uncomfortable. Learning to ask for consent in a social situation can help you to talk about it in a sexual relationship.



Consent is when someone says yes to sex clearly and happily and is not under any pressure with their answer. People cannot consent if they are asleep, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or unconscious. Anyone can withdraw their consent at any point. If they said yes at the beginning, they can say no at any stage and it's ok. If you feel uncomfortable, speak up about it, stop/pause what you are doing and talk to your partner.



Remember, someone asking for your consent is a good thing – be confident and say how you feel. If you're asking for someone else's consent, always respect their answer if they say 'no'. Remember that 'no' means 'no' and it's important to respect this; if someone says no to sex, they don't have to give a reason and, whatever their reason, it's valid and must be respected.

3

I have started to feel attracted to my friend who is the same sex, does this mean that I am gay/lesbian?



There are lots of words used to describe people's 'sexual orientation' ie. who they feel attracted to, but these are just words, and attraction doesn't follow rules. During adolescence we have a lot of bodily and hormonal changes going on which can affect our moods, our feelings and our ideas about ourselves and how we feel about others.

Your feelings for your friend may be a sign of developing attraction to the same sex, or they might be developing feelings of attraction and emotion towards that friend. It might be that you are attracted to people of the same sex and the opposite sex – attraction is not always clear-cut, and who we're attracted to may change over time.

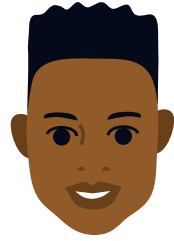
Try not to feel stressed about it. Be aware of your feelings and maybe talk to someone you trust. Remember, this does not need to be about sex, it might just be attraction or affection. Some people may choose to identify as gay, bisexual or lesbian, as they feel it helps them to describe who they are and to understand their identity and feelings, while other people may not like being labelled. You don't have to decide, just listen to your feelings with an open mind.

You don't have to describe yourself or choose a label for the sake of others. Always remember that it is about you and what makes you happy and comfortable.



4

Every time I see this girl at school I get an erection and sometimes I wake up in the morning with one, after dreaming about her. Is this normal?



Erections are a perfectly normal part of puberty and your development. Biologically, an erection is blood flowing into the penis, which is not a bone or muscle, but a spongy tissue that gets filled with blood and therefore gets hard. They can arrive at strange times and cause a bit of embarrassment but there is nothing wrong with you.

Sometimes they happen if you see someone you are attracted to, or when you watch something in a film that arouses you, but they can happen when you least expect it. The best thing is to just relax and know that it will go away. Try not to think about it by focusing on something else.

Erections can also happen when you're asleep and you may ejaculate. This is sometimes called a 'wet dream' and can be confusing. You might feel ashamed, but it's a natural process while you're still developing. Girls also experience this type of physical feeling of attraction and arousal.



5

How can I tell my partner that I don't like pornography and don't want to do some of the sexual acts s/he wants?



Pornography or 'porn' is 'sexually explicit' content where people are acting out sex or sexual activity. It's been around in different forms for hundreds of years to arouse, stimulate or bring people pleasure.

Porn is staged - it rarely shows realistic people, relationships or sexual activity – it's fantasy sex. Kindness, tenderness and communication, which are all needed to make real-life sex pleasurable, consensual and safe, do not usually feature in porn and condoms are rarely shown.



Consent is often not asked for in porn and the message about safe sex is mostly lost. Because of this, porn can give us unrealistic, and even unhealthy, ideas about what to expect from sex, our bodies and relationships. For some young people, the only information they have on sex is through pornography, and this can give them the wrong message about what sex should be like.

So if you are uncomfortable watching pornography or with anything you are being asked to do, you have the right to say no – you shouldn't do anything you don't want to. Talk to your partner to explain how you feel about pornography, and about the things you like and don't like.



Read more in the Q&A on [Staying Safe](#).

6

My boyfriend is older than me and has been pressuring me to have sex; he says that if I really loved him, I would. I don't want to lose him, what should I do?



Sex is only one part of a relationship and having sex is not proof of love! Having sex because you feel pressured to do so to 'keep' a person is not a good reason to have sex!

You always have the right to say no to any form of sex or sexual activity – it doesn't matter who the other person is, what your relationship is, or what you've done with them, or others, in the past. This applies whether you're having sex for the first time with someone, or if you're in a long-term relationship.

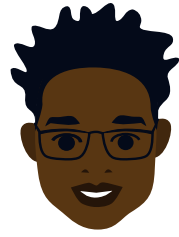


Consent is an ongoing process – you might agree to sex at one point, then change your mind later on; you might agree to one type of sexual activity but not to another – everyone has the right to do this. You might agree to having sex in a place you consider safe (your home or theirs), but not in a place that may expose you to being seen by others (a car, a friend's house, etc.)

If you have a partner who doesn't want to have sex, remember that they are saying no to sex, not to you. It's also important to know that young people who are below the age of consent cannot legally give their consent to sex and having sex with them is a criminal offence. This age varies from country to country.

7

There's lots of talk about 'consent', but what does it actually mean?



Consent is when someone says yes to something clearly and happily and is not under any pressure with their answer. Consent in sex is something that you need to ask for and listen to every time you have any kind of sexual activity. Sex without consent is sexual abuse or rape.



Not giving consent means saying 'NO' no matter how you say it, with a smile or while hugging... No is

NO!

1 Consent is a choice you're free to make without pressure or force. Consent cannot be given when you are drunk, have taken drugs or are asleep. If the person you are asking consent from is under the influence of any of those substances, their 'yes' may not be truthful and you should not consider it as consent.

2 A person does not have to give their consent because someone asks or encourages them. You should only do things you actually want to do, not things that you feel you're expected to do.

3 A person can change their mind about having sex at any point, even if they've had sex with that person before, and even if they're already naked and things are getting hot between them. Sometimes things can move very quickly when we get intimate with someone and you can ask them to stop at any point.

4

If you consent to something like kissing, it doesn't mean that you have given your consent to other things, like sex. For example, you may enjoy touching each other but not feel ready to have sex. Consent needs to be discussed at each stage and remember you can always change your mind.

5

A person can only consent to something if they have all the information and know the full story. For example, if someone says they'll use a condom and then they don't, there isn't full consent. In many countries "stealthing" (removing the condom during sex) is a criminal offence.

Remember, you should never have sex unless you want to. You always have a right to say no at any time – it doesn't matter who the other person is, what your relationship is, or what you've done with them, or others, in the past.



8

I really don't want to get my girlfriend pregnant but I don't know which kind of contraception to use. Which is best?



There are many different types of contraception used to prevent pregnancy – each one has benefits and challenges so it's important to go to the clinic and get advice. Finding the right one for you and your partner is important so that you can have safe and pleasurable sex. There are only a few days a month when a woman can get pregnant, but because we all have different bodies it's difficult to know for sure which are the most fertile days, so using contraception consistently is the only way to avoid pregnancies (and STIs). As a young person, you and your partner may have different sexual partners over time, so preventing STIs including HIV is also important, as well as preventing pregnancy.



Male and female condoms (or 'femidoms') are the only forms of contraception that prevent both pregnancy and STIs, including HIV sometimes this is called 'dual protection'. Condoms are cheap and easy to get hold of and sometimes you can get them free from clinics.



Some types of contraception last months or years, such as hormonal implants, IUDs or contraceptive injections (e.g. Depo-Provera) for women.



Another option is the contraceptive pill which is taken every day. If you've had sexual intercourse and didn't use contraception, there is a form of emergency contraception, often called 'the morning after pill', that can be taken within 72 hours of having unprotected sex to prevent pregnancy.



There are many myths and misinformation about contraception and ways to avoid getting pregnant, such as standing up while having sex, washing your genitals with lemon juice, and 'pulling out' during sex – these will not work! If you're wondering about contraception, go to your health centre to get advice, these services are still available even during COVID-19.

Remember that these contraceptives don't protect you from STIs including HIV but you can use a condom plus another type of contraception together to protect yourself from pregnancy and STI/HIV.



9

I'm worried that I might have a STI because I have sores and itchy genitals. Where can I get help that will be confidential?



Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) can be prevented by using condoms and practising safer sex, and most can be easily treated if you get advice as early as possible. If things don't feel or look right it's important to get checked out. You can either go to your local health centre or a sexual and reproductive health clinic, if you have one nearby, and these services are confidential.



Don't feel embarrassed – remember nurses and other health professionals see this kind of thing all the time. It's their job to treat you without judgement and help you to prevent and treat STIs. Talk to your friends and ask them which health care providers and services they recommend – it's important to find someone who you feel comfortable talking to and who you trust.

Many STIs don't have any symptoms to begin with, or are harder to identify in males, so if you are having sex, it's a good idea to use condoms and go for regular tests to check that everything is OK. If you do have symptoms, they can be uncomfortable and painful and even if they might go away on their own, they will come back. It's important to get treatment before the symptoms get any worse – and to avoid passing the infection on to someone else through sexual intercourse. If you are worried that you may have an STI, you should tell everyone you've had sex with so they can get tested too. Remember that despite COVID-19 lockdowns, the healthcare services you need are still open so you can still go and get tested. Check local links for services.

10

My boyfriend says that he will pull out before he 'comes' when we have sex so we don't need to use contraception, could I still get pregnant?



Yes, you could get pregnant!

Withdrawal or pulling out the penis before ejaculating (or 'coming') does not prevent pregnancy. Semen and sperm can be released from the penis before ejaculation and many people have become pregnant this way. It's not a reliable method of contraception at all.

When a man is enjoying the moment, he may not actually be aware of when he's about to 'come' or ejaculate. Withdrawal also provides no protection from STIs including HIV. It's really important to make an appointment at the clinic to discuss different forms of contraception that can protect you from STIs, HIV and pregnancy and to choose a method that works for you and your partner. Remember condoms prevent pregnancy but also protect you from HIV and STIs and they are cheap and easy to get hold of.

If your period is late, or you think you might be pregnant, go to the clinic for a test as soon as possible.



11

Can I still get contraceptives if I am below the 'age of consent'?



Getting contraception when you are below the age of consent (the age when you're legally allowed to have sex) will depend on how old you are, where you live and the type of support there is for young people to access contraception.



It is important to think about accessing contraception before you have sex. Condoms can usually be bought easily from shops or pharmacies or are free from clinics. Other types of contraception may need your parents or guardian to give their permission for you to get them.

If you don't have someone who can come with you to give permission, speak to the health providers. In some countries there can be ways to access contraception without parental permission. If you're having sex before the age of consent, it is important to make sure that you're emotionally and physically ready, and that you have thought about what could happen.

There may be laws that mean one or both of you could be committing a crime by having sex – especially if one of you is over the age of consent and the other is under the age of consent, as this may be considered sexual abuse or rape.



12

I want to have sex with my partner, but I haven't told them I am living with HIV. What if they leave me?



For young people living with HIV, relationships have the added challenge of dealing with 'disclosure' – telling someone their HIV status. This is on top of all the usual issues about consent and contraception. It's really difficult to know how someone will react to hearing about HIV. Some people may face rejection and even discrimination, while for others there will be love and support.

If you feel ready, it is good to start that discussion by talking about HIV more generally to get a sense of how your girl/boyfriend might react. It might also help to talk to other people who have told their partners. You could ask them how they started the conversation, what helped the person understand, and how they knew they were ready to share their HIV status.

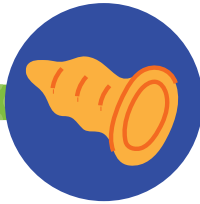


Remember that as a person living with HIV you have the same rights to loving and happy relationships as everybody else. If someone is not able to cope with the fact you are living with HIV, then they are not the right person to be with.



Read more in the Q&A [Living with HIV](#) and [check local links for services](#).

Some people may find it hard to get their head round at first, so it can help if you can offer explanations and help people understand how you can have a sexual relationship and still protect each other. **For example...**



Taking anti-retroviral treatment (ART) and keeping your viral load so low that it can't be detected or transmitted (U=U means Undetectable equals Untransmittable).

Using condoms correctly every time you have sex to prevent the transmission of HIV & STIs.

Taking (if available) pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) if you are HIV negative that prevents transmission of HIV from a partner living with HIV.



Talk to your healthcare provider about these options.

13

There is an older man who has offered to pay my school fees if I meet him and have sex sometimes. I need the help...is it that bad to say yes?



Having someone who can support you and provide money and gifts might seem like a good thing to help you through tough times, but you are putting yourself in a situation where one person has power over you. Offering money and gifts to a person to do things is a form of bribery or control. Your need for help means he can persuade you or manipulate you into doing things you really don't want to do.

You need to think about why he's using the offer of money to start a sexual relationship with you.

Is this the type of relationship you want?



Is he trying to make you dependent on him and for him to control what you do?



When you are agreeing to sex on the basis of gifts or money it can affect your confidence to say 'No' to things, or to consent in the first place.



Read more in the Q&A on **Healthy Relationships**.

14

I like sending sexy texts to my partner, should I stop?



Sending messages about sex or sexy pictures to a boyfriend or girlfriend can be exciting and a fun part of a relationship but remember, there are important rules to keep you safe.



For some people 'sexting' is something they like to try out, but others may not feel comfortable with it, and they should never be made to do it. It's important to talk about this and, if you or your partner doesn't consent to receiving or sharing intimate pictures, it needs to stop.



Sending sexually explicit messages between young people under 18 is often against the law. There may also be rules on the phone apps you use about the language and content you share (remember companies can check your messages so nothing is 100% private).

If you have discussed how you feel, and you are both happy messaging, you should discuss what type of things you are ok about sharing and also what happens to the messages. Are they deleted straight away?





You need to think of how you'd feel if the trust was broken. You might agree to share pictures, but not to include your face so that you can't be identified if the picture is shared later. If you have any doubts about trusting the person, do not share anything, it does not mean you don't care about them.

Remember you cannot guarantee what will happen to a message or picture so you need to think about the risk that they could be shared at some point without your permission. It happens a lot when relationships end and people want to make you feel bad.

If you have also promised to keep things private, and to delete messages, you must keep your promise too.



Further information and contact details

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