



Travel and your sexual health

Condoms: don't leave home without them!

Before you go

It's very important to think about your sexual health and plan for contraception while you are away. Take a supply of condoms with the UK kite mark or European CE stamp mark to ensure quality. You may buy condoms abroad, but you can't always be sure they are fit for the job. Also take along a supply of emergency contraception. It's available in many countries, but it may not be as easy as you think to get it.

Safe sex

Holidays are about enjoying yourself, relaxing, getting away from it all and doing things that you would not normally do at home. Even so, whether you are on holiday, a business trip or visiting friends and relatives, the fact that you are away contributes to that "anything goes" feeling that increase your chance of risky sexual relations - even if sex was the last thing you expected to be doing while abroad. Watch alcohol and drug consumption while travelling - the more you partake, the more likely you'll be to have unprotected sex.

Remember, many people with an STI or HIV look perfectly normal - indeed, they may not even be aware that they are infected so always insist on using a condom. It's the most effective protection you can use. It only takes one episode of unprotected sex to leave you with an unwanted pregnancy, STI, HIV or hepatitis B: don't risk it.

If you think you might have unprotected sex abroad, ask your travel health adviser about vaccination to protect against hepatitis B virus. HBV is spread through sex and blood contact. It is a common infection worldwide, but especially in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and the Caribbean. It can cause a lifelong infection that destroys the liver (cirrhosis), causing liver failure. Many people don't know that they are carriers and so spread the virus unknowingly. Luckily condoms protect against it.

HIV

HIV is predominantly transmitted through sex and is a lifelong infection, fatal if left untreated. Anyone having unprotected sex is at risk of HIV infection, but the risk increases if you have sex abroad, in particular countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America. But no country is untouched by HIV so even if your destination is not listed here, the risk is real.

HIV can also be spread among drug users through infected blood on shared needles, as well as in tattoo, piercing and acupuncture equipment. More information on HIV and sexual health is at www.tht.org.uk.

Contraception

Used properly, condoms are your most effective ally for sexual health, but take care of them. Latex condoms are easily damaged by oil-based lubricants such as Vaseline, baby oil or suntan lotion. If you are travelling for a long period of time it's worth getting information from Marie Stopes International (www.mariestopes.org.uk). They can advise on local clinics abroad that may be able to help you should you have an unwanted pregnancy or STI.

Sexual assault

If you are the victim of a sexual assault contact the British Embassy, High Commission or Consulate in your host country immediately. They can assist you in confidence and refer you to local specialist doctors who speak English. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has recently published a leaflet you may find helpful: *Travel and living abroad; when things go wrong* is at www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/when-things-go-wrong/rape.

Back home

If you've had sex while away, it's worth visiting a sexual health clinic for a confidential check-up as soon as you return (find your local clinic at www.fpa.org.uk). They can test for all the STIs including HIV. Untreated STIs can lead to serious problems such as infertility, but in the early stages they can be cleared up with a course of antibiotics. Remember, some STIs don't have any symptoms at all. And, on the other hand, some symptoms don't have anything to do with an STI. If you have an itch, don't panic - just get yourself checked out.

Enjoy travelling and protect yourself: Give yourself a trip to remember for all the right reasons.

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