

Safer Sex and COVID-19

All County of Santa Clara residents should stay home as much as possible and minimize contact with others to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Sex is a normal part of life and should always be with the consent of all parties. This information offers ways to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 during sex. Decisions about sex and sexuality need to be balanced with personal and public health.

During this extended public health emergency, people will and should have sex. Try using these steps to reduce the risk to yourself, your partners, and our community.

But can you have sex?

Yes! Here are some tips for how to enjoy safer sex and reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19.

1. Know how COVID-19 spreads.

- **You can get COVID-19 from a person who has it.**
 - COVID-19 can be spread to people who are within 6 feet of a person with COVID-19.
 - Tiny bits of virus are spread in the saliva, mucus, or breath of people with COVID-19, even from people who do not have symptoms.
 - Droplets from breathing (called *respiratory droplets*) can land on hands and surfaces and stay for days. Touching a surface with infectious droplets on it can infect someone if their hand then touches their mouth, nose, or eyes.
- **We still have a lot to learn about COVID-19 and sex.**
 - Respiratory droplets, saliva, and fluids from your nose are known to spread COVID-19 and could be around during sexual contact.
 - While kissing or during sexual intercourse, you are in close contact with someone and can spread COVID-19 through droplets or saliva.
 - There is no known proof that the virus can spread through semen. Some research shows the possibility of the virus spreading to a person's mouth or lungs by contact with infected feces; however, this needs further study.
 - We do not know if COVID-19 can be spread through vaginal or anal sex.
 - We know that other coronaviruses do not easily spread through sex. This means sex is not likely a common way that COVID-19 spreads.

2. Have sex only with people close to you.

- **You are your safest sex partner.** Self-pleasure will not spread COVID-19, especially if you wash your hands (and any sex toys) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after sex.
- **Communicating with our partner(s) virtually** (known as cybersex or sexting) is a great alternative for when our partner(s) live in a different household and are following the social distancing recommendation.

- **The next safest partner is someone you live with.** Having close contact — including sex — with only a small circle of people can help lower the risk of spreading COVID-19.
 - You and your partner/s you live with can lower the risk of infection by wearing masks when in public, following social distancing of 6 feet or more, and hand washing often.
 - Have sex **only** with partners who give their permission (consent).
 - To learn more about consent, visit on.nyc.gov/consent.
- **You should limit close contact — including sex — with anyone outside your household.** If you do have sex with people outside of your household, have as few partners as possible and pick partners you trust. Talk about COVID-19 risk factors, just as you would discuss PrEP, condoms, and other safer sex topics. Ask them about COVID-19 **before** you hook up.
- **Do they have symptoms, or have they had symptoms in the last 14 days?** Most people with COVID-19 have symptoms, but people can spread the virus even if they do not have symptoms. Fever, cough, sore throat, and difficulty breathing are symptoms to ask about. Note that asking about symptoms is not a perfect way to know whether someone has COVID-19.
 - In the way some people never show symptoms of sexually-transmitted infections like gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis before passing it to their partner(s), some folks will never show symptoms of COVID-19 before passing it to their partner(s). Skip sex if you or your partner(s) are not feeling well.
- **Have they been diagnosed with COVID-19 using a nasal swab or saliva test?** People who have recovered from COVID-19 at least 10 days from the day their symptoms started (or their positive test was taken) and who have not had fever for at least 24 hours are likely no longer able to spread the virus.
- **If two is company then three (or more) is definitely a crowd.** Large gatherings of any type are not safe during COVID-19. Close contact with multiple people should be avoided. But, if you decide to find a crowd, below are tips to reduce your risk of spreading or getting COVID-19:
 - Limit the size of your guest list. Keep it intimate.
 - Go with a consistent sex partner.
 - Pick larger, more open, and well-ventilated spaces.
 - Wear a [face covering](#), avoid kissing, and do not touch your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
 - Bring an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
 - Talk with your partner(s) and understand how COVID-19 is spread. Use your best judgment and remember it is always about lowering your risk as much as possible.
- **If you usually meet your sex partners online or make a living by having sex,** consider taking a break from in-person dates. Video dates, sexting, subscription-based fan platforms, sexy “Zoom parties” or chat rooms may be options for you.
- **If you decide to have sex outside of your circle of contacts or a hook-up:**
 - Closely monitor yourself for symptoms.
- Think about getting a COVID-19 test (swab or saliva) on more often (monthly or within five to seven days of a hook-up). Visit sccfreetest.org or call **211** for information on where you can get tested. Testing is free at sites sponsored by the County of Santa Clara, but you can also ask your primary care provider to refer you for a test.
- Be extra careful when you are with people at risk for severe COVID-19 illness, such as people over 65 years of age or those with serious [medical conditions](#).
 - Be sure to use face coverings and wash hands frequently to minimize risk to others.

3. If you already had COVID-19, it does not mean you won't get it again. Do not depend on test results to help you make decisions about sex.

- A positive COVID-19 test may show that you were exposed to the virus before or have antibodies to it, but that does not mean you are protected from getting infected by the virus again.
- A past positive COVID-19 test (nose swab or saliva) means you have had COVID-19 and may be less likely to get it again. But we don't know how strong that protection is or for how long it lasts.
- **Be careful in using these tests to make decisions about who you have sex with and what kind of sex you have since antibody test results are not definite proof you are immune.** For more information about COVID-19 tests and how to understand the results, check the [Guidance on Interpreting COVID-19 Test Results](#).

4. Take care during sex.

- **Kissing can easily pass the virus.** Avoid kissing anyone who is not part of your small circle of close contacts.
- **Rimming (mouth on anus) might spread the virus.** Virus in feces may enter your mouth and could lead to infection.
- **Wear a face covering or mask.** Maybe it's your thing, maybe it's not, but during COVID-19 wearing a face covering that covers your nose and mouth is a good way to add a layer of protection during sex. Heavy breathing and panting can spread the virus further, and if you or your partner have COVID-19 and do not know it, a mask can help stop that spread.
- **Make it a little kinky.** Be creative with sexual positions and physical barriers, like walls, that allow sexual contact while preventing close face to face contact.
- **Masturbate together.** Use physical distance and face coverings to reduce the risk.
- **Condoms and dental dams can reduce contact with saliva, semen or feces** during oral or anal sex. But unlike other STIs, condoms may not be sufficient to protect against COVID-19, since fingers coming in contact with infectious droplets can transmit the virus. Visit [the Crane Center](#) to get free safer sex products. As a bonus, you can also get a free rapid HIV test.
- **Washing up before and after sex is more important than ever.**
 - Wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
 - Wash sex toys with soap and warm water.
 - Disinfect keyboards and touch screens that you share with others.

5. Skip sex if you or your partner are not feeling well.

- **If you don't feel well**, or even start to feel unwell, avoid kissing, sex or any close contact with others. For more information, visit sccgov.org/coronavirus and search [COVID symptoms](#).
- **If you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19**, avoid close contact with anyone outside your household and follow Santa Clara County Public Health guidance about how to prevent exposing others. People exposed to COVID-19 should get tested for the virus using a swab or saliva test.
- **If you or your partner have a medical condition that can lead to severe COVID-19 illness**, you may also want to skip sex.
 - Medical conditions include lung disease, moderate to severe asthma, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, kidney disease, liver disease, cancer, or a weakened immune system (for example, having unsuppressed HIV or a low CD4 count).
- **Monitor your symptoms.**
 - If you are over 60 years of age or have a condition that puts you at higher risk for severe disease, monitor your illness even more closely and discuss any concerns with your doctor.

- If your symptoms get worse, you have difficulty breathing, or you develop other worrying symptoms, call your doctor immediately.
- If it is an emergency, call 911. Tell them that you may have COVID-19 disease.
- **There is no specific medicine to treat COVID-19 disease.**
 - Get plenty of rest, drink lots of fluids, eat healthy foods, and manage stress.
 - Use acetaminophen (i.e. Tylenol) or ibuprofen (i.e. Advil) to reduce fever and aches and pains.
 - Additional care in the hospital can help manage more serious problems or complications.

6. Prevent HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy.

- **HIV:** Using condoms, taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and having an undetectable viral load all help prevent HIV. For more information, visit sccgov.org/sites/phd/Pages/phd.aspx and search [STD/HIV Testing & Resources](#) under the **Services** tab.
- **Other STIs:** Using condoms help prevent other STIs. Visit sccgov.org/sites/phd/Pages/phd.aspx and search [STD/HIV Testing & Resources](#) under the **Services** tab.
- **The Crane Center:** Call the Crane Center at **408-792-3720** (Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) to get more information about making an appointment for testing.

7. Get more information on COVID-19.

- Santa Clara County Health Department webpage: www.sccphd.org/coronavirus
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention webpage: www.cdc.gov
- If you have any questions, call your doctor.
- How to disinfect your home if someone is sick: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/disinfecting-your-home.html

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **Is sexual intercourse safe with my spouse/partner who has a high contact job and cannot practice social distancing?**
 - High contact jobs such as grocery clerk, medical providers, and factory workers can choose to self-quarantine from others in their home.
 - Partners with high contact jobs can take the following safety steps to further protect their household members: take off their shoes when arriving home, remove and wash their clothing, and shower. However, self-quarantine is still the most effective (CDC).
 - To help reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 during sex:
 - a. Avoid kissing.
 - b. You and your partner can wear each a face mask.
 - c. Use protection during intercourse to reduce contact with saliva, semen and feces.
2. **Is it safe to have sexual intercourse if my partner and I have both tested positive for COVID-19 and have recovered? Are we considered immune?**
 - Currently the immune response to COVID-19 is not fully understood, and is still being researched.
 - Most likely it is safe for you and your partner to have sexual intercourse, if you are following safety precautions.
 - Avoid having any additional sexual partners, as this could increase your risk.

- 3. I believe I had COVID-19 symptoms but never got tested. Is it safe for my partner and I to have intercourse?**
- You can confirm a previous infection through antibody testing, if you think you were experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.
 - If your antibody test is positive, it is likely that you were infected with COVID-19 and can continue to have safe intercourse, if you practice the recommended safety measures.
 - If your antibody test is negative, you most likely did not have an infection previously. However, you could have been recently infected and should wait to have intercourse with your partner.
 - It is recommended that you get tested for COVID-19 to find out if you are still contagious. If you start to have symptoms, you will need to isolate yourself for at least 10 days from the date of your symptom onset AND 24 hours with no fever AND your other symptoms improve.
- 4. I was positive for COVID-19 but have now recovered. When can I resume intercourse with my household partner?**
- If you tested positive for COVID-19 and did not repeat testing to check if you are still contagious, it is not considered safe for you to have intercourse unless you took one of the following steps.
 - If you had symptoms (symptomatic):
 - 10 days have passed since the symptoms started
 - 24 hours with no fever (without fever-reducing medication), AND
 - Improvements of any other symptoms (like cough or shortness of breath)
 - If you did not have symptoms (asymptomatic):
 - 10 days have passed since the date your positive test was collected
 - After completing one of these steps, you can be considered “recovered” and are safe to have sex with your partner.
- 5. As an older adult with underlying health conditions, is it safe for me to have intercourse?**
- If you are an older adult with existing health conditions, it is important to be careful during this time and take steps to prevent infection, such as social distancing when in public (6 feet apart), washing hands often, and wearing a face covering when leaving home.
 - Discuss with your partner their sexual practices. They may change your level of risk.
 - Avoid having intercourse with people outside your household.
 - As an older adult, consider the following steps to help reduce your risk of infection during intercourse:
 - Avoid kissing.
 - You and your partner each wear a face mask.
 - Use a condom to reduce contact with saliva and feces.
- 6. I have a new partner that does not live with me, what should I consider for intercourse?**
- You should consider all the risks carefully before having casual intercourse or intercourse with a new partner. CDC recommends following social distancing protocols, and having intercourse with a new partner outside your household goes against that recommendation. Intercourse with someone in your household is the safest choice.
 - However, if you are thinking of having intercourse with someone outside your household, ask yourself and your new partner the following questions to consider your risk for spreading or getting COVID-19.
 - Do we have jobs that do not allow us to socially distance from others?
 - Are we older adults with underlying health conditions?

- Are we consistently following safety guidelines, such as wearing a mask and staying 6 feet apart when outside?
- Do either of us have any symptoms or show signs of illness?
- Do either of us have any other partners?
- Do either of us live in a high community transmission area?
- If you and your partner consider yourselves low risk for passing on the virus, then follow these steps for safer intercourse:
 - Avoid kissing.
 - You and your partner each wear a face mask.
 - Use a condom to reduce contact with saliva and feces.
 - Reduce the number of partners you have overall.
 - Have conversations about what you and your partner are doing to socially distance and protect yourselves.
 - Follow steps to reduce the risk of STDs and HIV.

7. I don't live with my long term committed partner, what should we do about intercourse?

- Physical intimacy and intercourse are part of life, especially when in committed relationships. The safer choice is to not engage in intercourse with someone outside your household. However, if you are considering having intercourse with your partner who is not in your household, please ask yourself and your partner the same questions as those listed above in FAQ #6.

If you test positive for COVID-19, or if you have symptoms of COVID-19, tell your partner(s).

If you test positive for COVID-19, protect your partner, family and friends.

- While at home, stay in separate rooms and away from other people in your household. Use a separate bathroom, if available.
- Wear a face mask when you are around other people at home. If you are not able to wear a mask, then people should not be in the same room with you, or they should wear a mask.
- Clean your hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and throw away used tissues in a lined trash can. Wash hands completely with soap and water afterwards.
- Avoid sharing personal household items like dishes, glasses, or bedding.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces and objects (like doorknobs and light switches). Regular household cleaners will do the job.

Self-isolate for at least 10 days and until your illness is better.

- **If you have symptoms (symptomatic), stay isolated at home for 10 days from the date your symptoms started AND 24 hours after symptoms resolve (resolution of fever without fever-reducing medicine and improvement of other symptoms) – whichever is longer.**
- **If you do not have symptoms (asymptomatic), stay isolated at home until at least 10 days from the date your positive test was collected.**
- People who work in a healthcare setting should notify their occupational health office and follow any additional instructions before returning to work.

Close contacts should quarantine immediately for 14 days after exposure to someone with COVID-19.

Close contacts should quarantine (stay home). The quarantine period starts immediately and ends 14 days after being exposed to a person with COVID-19. If a close contact continues to be around someone with COVID-19 who is in isolation (i.e. lives in the same house), the quarantine period for the close contact is extended an additional 14 days after the case's isolation period ends.

- During the quarantine period, close contacts can stay at home but should separate as much as possible from you. If possible, they should stay in separate rooms and use a separate bathroom.
- If they need to go out of the house, they should practice strict social distancing and avoid contact with others.
 - They should not attend work, school, or daycare.
 - They should not participate in group activities or gatherings.
 - They should not travel on an airplane.
- During the quarantine period, your household contacts should monitor themselves for symptoms. If they develop fever, cough, or other symptoms, they should call their doctor.
- If any of your household contacts are over 60 years of age or have a condition that puts them at higher risk for severe disease, they should be even more careful to separate and protect themselves, monitor themselves for illness, and discuss any concerns with their doctor.
- Before visiting a hospital, emergency room, or doctor's office, they should call ahead to notify the provider that another household member was recently diagnosed with COVID-19.
- If your household contact develops fever, cough, or shortness of breath but does not get tested for COVID-19, they should remain isolated at home until 24 hours after fever is gone and other symptoms improve.

For the latest information, visit sccgov.org/coronavirus or cdc.gov/covid19.

The County of Santa Clara Public Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 8.20.20

This guide has been adapted from *NYC Health Department's "Safer Sex and COVID-19"*

https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-sex-guidance.pdf?utm_source=morning_brew

And *The Fenway Institute's "COVID-19 and Your Sexual"*

<https://fenwayhealth.org/fenway-health-releases-guide-to-covid-19-and-your-sexual-health/>