

How to have 'the talk' with your new partner

Picture this: you're dating someone new after your long-term relationship ended. The dates are progressing well, but you're yet to take it to the next level. You end up back at their place and things start heating up. You want to have sex, but suddenly your thoughts turn to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), safer sex and that you should really be using protection...

Will they provide a condom or should I?

Are they free of STIs? Am I? When was my last test?

What will they think of me if I bring out a condom?

Maybe we should start the conversation now... but how...?

Or maybe we'll just let go and worry about it next time.

The above scenario – or at least a version of it – is a reality for many people in Australia. The statistics confirm the story: rates of chlamydia (a common STI) are increasing nationally in certain age groups.

Chlamydia infections in younger women (aged 15-24 years) have decreased in recent years. However, rates have gone up in those aged 24 years and over. And, most alarmingly, from 2006 to 2015, in women over 40 years, the rates of infection have doubled.

Jean Hailes Specialist Women's Health GP, Dr Marnie Newman, explains the potential reasons behind this worrying trend for midlife women.

“A lot of women over 40 are re-entering the dating scene after the end of a marriage or long-term partnership,” she says. “They may feel that because they're older, the same risks and rules don't apply. They may feel that the dangers of STIs, such as causing infertility, don't matter because they no longer want to get pregnant. They may not know how to talk about condoms or which words to use, or they may feel it's their partner's duty to bring it up in conversation.”

If you're struggling to find the right words or aren't sure how to broach the subject, here are some fast facts, hints and tips to help get you talking with your new partner.

Start with you

Before you kick off the conversation, Dr Newman suggests thinking first about your own wants and needs. Ask yourself questions like: 'Am I ready for sex?' 'Is our relationship ready for sex?' 'What do I need from my partner to begin the next stage of our relationship in a happy and healthy way?'

Knowing what you want, and on what terms, can help give you confidence in what to say and how to say it.

Remember, sex is never 100% safe between two people unless:

- You have both been tested negative for all STIs
- You have both had no sex with anyone else since your negative test results
- You have both had no contact with any blood, semen, breast milk, vaginal fluids or saliva from anyone else since your negative test results.

Doctor's orders

After ensuring you're emotionally ready for sex with your new partner, make an appointment with your GP. You and your doctor can discuss your options for protection, what the risks are, and get a sexual health screening (a test for STIs). Being well informed helps to make tricky discussions easier.

Also, knowing you are free of STIs helps to set the example to your partner. It's a proactive way of showing that you expect the same of them. When you start talking to your partner about sex and protection, you can show them your results and ask them to do the same.

Dr Newman reminds us that many people with STIs don't even know they are infected. Some people may never show a symptom, but can still be carriers and infect others. "Many common STIs are silent," says Dr Newman. "You can't tell just by looking at someone if they are free from STIs. The only way to tell is by getting tested".

If in doubt, use condoms

Condoms are one of the best forms of protection and are an effective barrier against most STIs. To make condoms easier to use, Dr Newman suggests that you:

- Discuss their use in advance with your partner
- Have them close at hand, such as in the bedside drawer or in your handbag
- If you haven't used one before, or for a while, practise beforehand
- Talk to your GP if you are not sure how to use them.

What words to use

When it comes to talking about safer sex, stick with simple statements so nothing gets lost in translation. Saying something like 'When we have sex, I would like to use a condom', is clear and straightforward.

It's all about timing

Choosing when to talk can be just as important as what to say. Bringing up the topic in the middle of making out, or just before having sex, can result in clouded judgement. Instead, choose a time where you won't be interrupted or distracted, where you both feel free and confident to talk openly and honestly. That way, when you do have sex you'll both be on the same page and know what the other person wants.

If, however, you're caught up in the moment and don't want to ruin the mood, questions like 'Can I help you put a condom on?', or 'How quickly can you put a condom on?', can make the situation more fun and playful, while still getting the message across.

As a final word of advice, Dr Newman says “It’s not always easy to talk about subjects such as safer sex with someone new, but what’s important is that all women have the right resources and information to protect themselves and their health.”

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