

Condoms ineffective against preventing STDs, research shows

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are a serious public health concern, affecting millions of people worldwide.



Source: Supplied.

While condoms have long been considered a reliable method of preventing STDs, recent research has shown that they may not be as effective as previously thought, particularly when it comes to certain STDs.

These include the human papillomavirus, the herpes simplex virus, syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia.

Human papillomavirus

One of the most well-known STDs that condoms may not prevent is human papillomavirus (HPV). According to the National Library of Medicine, HPV is one of the most common STIs. It is most usually transmitted during vaginal or anal intercourse, but can also spread through close skin-to-skin contact.

A person infected with HPV can infect another person even if they show no signs or symptoms.

Signs and symptoms of HPV include genital warts (that appear as flat lesions, small cauliflower-like bumps or tiny stemlike protrusions), common warts (that appear as rough, raised bumps and usually occur on the hands and fingers), plantar

warts (hard, grainy growths that usually appear on the heels or balls of your feet), and flat warts (flat-topped, slightly raised lesions that can appear anywhere).

While condoms can reduce the risk of HPV transmission, they may not provide complete protection, as the virus can be present on skin areas not covered by a condom.

Herpes simplex virus

Another STD that condoms may not protect against is herpes simplex virus (HSV). This virus is highly contagious and can be transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, even when no symptoms are present.

A study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) found that herpes is one of the most common STDs worldwide, with an estimated 417 million people between the ages of 15 and 49 infected.

Condoms can reduce the risk of HSV transmission, but they may not provide complete protection, as the virus can be present on skin areas not covered by a condom.



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Syphilis

In addition, condoms may not protect against syphilis, which is caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that in 2020, 133,945 cases of all stages of syphilis were reported, including 41,655 cases of primary and secondary (P&S) syphilis, the most infectious stages of the disease.

Syphilis can be transmitted through direct contact with a syphilis sore, which can occur on or around the genitals, rectum, or mouth. Condoms can reduce the risk of syphilis transmission, but they may not provide complete protection, as syphilis sores can occur on skin areas not covered by a condom.

Gonorrhea and chlamydia

Finally, condoms may not provide complete protection against gonorrhea and chlamydia, two common bacterial STDs.

According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 78 million people are infected with gonorrhea each year, while an estimated 131 million people are infected with chlamydia.

Condoms can reduce the risk of gonorrhea and chlamydia transmission, but they may not provide complete protection, as these bacterial infections can be present in the throat, rectum, or eyes.

How to prevent the spread of STDs

So, what can individuals do to protect themselves and their partners from STDs? Murray Hewlett, chief executive officer of Affinity Health, recommends a combination of methods, including consistent and correct use of condoms, regular testing for STDs, and vaccination against HPV and hepatitis B.

"It's also important to maintain open and honest communication with sexual partners about testing and vaccination status, and to avoid risky behaviors such as unprotected sex or having multiple partners," concludes Hewlett.

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