Sex in a hot tub safe? [1]

Dear Alice,

Is having sex in the shower that is hot or in a hot tub safe? Someone told me the heat kills the sperm. I thought it sounds dumb but I was just wondering.

Thanks,

Waterman

Answer

Dear Waterman,

Sultry splashing around might spice up your sex life, but don’t bank on the water as protection from pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Indeed, your question is a popular one; however, regardless of whether you are having sex in a shower, a hot tub, or any other kind of watery environment, HIV and other STDs are still transmitted in the presence of water, even if the water is hot, salty, or chlorinated. This goes for sperm, too. However, there are ways to have safer sex in the water; they just might require a little bit of planning.

If you and your partner(s) test negative for HIV and STDs on a routine basis, the primary risk posed by unprotected sex in water is pregnancy (so long as there’s a female in the mix). While sperm count may be reduced in very high temperatures, having sex in a heated environment such as a hot tub does not qualify as an effective form of birth control. Spermicidal substances are not suitable for sex in watery environments because they’re likely to dissolve or wash away. Cervical caps and diaphragms can move around in the vagina when exposed to excess water, so they’re not recommended either. However, birth control pills, patches, rings, and IUDs will all function just as well in water as they do elsewhere.
If you are uncertain about your or your partner’s HIV/STD status, you’ll need to use an additional form of protection to reduce the likelihood of transmission. Male latex condoms should not be used in watery environments because they’re likely to slip off in the water. Even if the condom doesn’t slip off, water can get trapped between the condom and the penis, thereby loosening it and reducing its ability to prevent HIV/STD transmission. High temperatures and chlorine may deteriorate the condom or cause it to break, and remnants of oil-based products such as sunscreen, bath oils, and soaps in the water may come into contact with the condom and reduce its durability. If male latex condoms are your only option, the general rule is that a condom is better than nothing; however, make sure to put the condom on outside of the water to reduce the likelihood of slippage.

For safer sex in watery environments, a better alternative to male latex condoms are female condoms [2]. They’re suitable for water sex because they’re not likely to slip out of the vagina, and they’re made of durable polyurethane (however, male polyurethane condoms have a higher breakage rate, so stick to female polyurethane condoms). Make sure to insert the female condom while outside of the water to ensure correct placement and you’ll be good to go.

Keep in mind that unprotected sex in water can cause excess friction and even push water inside of the vagina, which can cause painful micro tears, irritation, and infections. By using a silicone lubricant, you can reduce the increased friction caused by watery environments.

In general, watery environments are not ideal for sex; not only does water reduce the effectiveness of common HIV, STD, and pregnancy prevention methods, but it also makes women more susceptible to urinary tract and yeast infections. However, if you choose to have sex in a watery environment and you are a Columbia student, check out this sexual health map [3] for information on where to get condoms (both male and female) and other safer sex supplies on the Morningside campus. If you are on the Medical Center campus, the Center for Student Wellness [4] carries a variety of safer sex supplies including male and female condoms, and both water- and silicone-based lubricant.

Alice!
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