Dear Alice,

I've never bought condoms before. I'm a smart shopper? I look at things like quality and value when I buy anything? and I want to do the same with my condom purchases. But I don't know what to look for!!! And I'm not sure I'm ballsy enough to walk up to the pharmacist and ask, "Now, tell me, if your daughter were having sex, which brand of condom would you want her to use with her boyfriend?"

I want a really effective condom, that doesn't, like, smell weird or fit poorly or anything. And I don't want to whip it out and have my man laughing at it.

Who do I ask for advice on this??? Where do I go?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Kudos to you for applying your smart shopper standards to your future condom purchases. So many different brands of condoms are available on the market that making a decision about which type to purchase can be overwhelming.

Before we get into the nitty gritty details of condom selection, it's important that you know in the United States, latex condom manufacturers must follow FDA standards, meaning that every condom is checked for defects using electronic testing before it is packaged. Additionally, the FDA checks samples from every batch by performing water-leak or airburst tests. (Ironically, condoms are not tested the way they are used, i.e., there are no friction tests!) So, no matter which brand or type of condoms you settle on, you can be confident the condoms will be effective if you use them correctly and consistently.

When making male condom selections, you will need to consider the types of material, lubrication, size, texture, and novelty (flavors, etc.) that work best for you and your partner. Here is a rundown on all your choices:

Material

Latex: The majority of condoms manufactured and used in the U.S. are made of latex (a substance tapped from rubber trees). This option has the widest selection of brands and
types, is the least expensive, and is the most well-researched and regulated type of condom. Remember that latex condoms can only be used with water- or silicone-based lubricants (no oil, petroleum jelly, or lotion, please!). Some people are allergic to latex and may consider using polyurethane condoms instead.

**Polyurethane**: Made from a synthetic material similar to plastic, polyurethane condoms are recommended for people who are allergic or sensitive to latex. Clear in color, not as elastic as latex (kind of like a thin sandwich bag), and wider than the average sized condom, they can also be used with water- or silicone-based lubricants. Additionally, the material conducts heat well, creating more sensation during sex. Research shows that polyurethane male condoms are effective in pregnancy and STI prevention—nearly as effective as latex condoms.

**Polyisoprene**: A newer type of non-latex male condoms is also available on the market as of 2008. These synthetic rubber sheaths are more similar to the feel, durability and elasticity of latex than polyurethane. Polyisoprene condoms are held to the same industry standards and have passed the same physical test requirements that are required of latex condoms. Water-, silicone- or oil-based lubricants can be used with these condoms.

**Nitrile**: Female condoms are now made with another synthetic rubber material called nitrile. Similar to the polyurethane material (of which female condoms were previously made), the material warms up easily to body temperature. The switch to the new, less expensive nitrile material has made female condoms more affordable. They are typically found wherever male condoms are sold. Female condoms are compatible with water-, silicone-, or oil-based lubricants. For more information, check out the FC2 female condom website [2].

**Lambskin**: Condoms made of lambskin (the intestine of a lamb) are the oldest type of condoms. These condoms, or "skins," are effective in preventing pregnancy, but NOT in preventing STIs or HIV transmission. Lambskin condoms may offer a more natural feel and can be used with both water- and oil-based lube (unlike latex), but are quite expensive, and again, do not offer protection against infections.

**Lubrication**

**Non-lubricated**: These condoms are most useful for oral sex and for people with allergies or sensitivities to lubricants.

**Lubricated**: Condoms with a water-based or silicone-based lubricant coating can ease penetration and minimize friction and the risk of breakage. To add your own water- or silicone-based lubricant, apply a couple of drops to the inside of the condom before it is rolled onto the penis, and then add more to the outside of the condom.

**Spermicidally lubricated**: Originally, Non-oxynol-9 (N-9) was thought to reduce sperm mobility and thus prevent pregnancy. However, research shows there's not actually enough N-9 on the condom to prevent pregnancy. Recent research has also found that N-9 can cause irritation and small sores in some people, and therefore may actually facilitate HIV transmission. The bottom line? You're better off avoiding condoms with N-9.

**Size**

Most condoms are manufactured as one-size-fits-all. However, the standard sizes and the tightness of the elastic rings, however, vary by manufacturer. Condoms generally fit men whose erect penis is average sized—anywhere from four to seven inches when erect. Some
condoms are "snugger fit," while others are "larger sized." It makes sense to purchase a variety to see what is appealing and fits. A snug yet comfortable fit decreases the chances that a condom will slip off during intercourse. For more information about condom sizes, check out Condom sizes?how do I know what fits? [3] in the GAA! archives.

**Texture**

When reading condom packaging, brands list descriptive terms, such as "ultra thin," "sensitive," "high sensation," or "extra strength." Some people prefer thinner condoms that allow for more sensation. Others prefer thicker condoms to feel more secure (although studies have shown that "ultrathin" condoms are just as effective as regular condoms). Other choices include "ribbed" or "studded" condoms, which are designed to give one or both partners' increased pleasure. The use of these different types of textures is a matter of personal preference; there have not been studies that rate the relative effectiveness. All condoms that are intended for intercourse, however, are FDA-approved and meet the agency's standards of effectiveness.

**Novelty**

Flavored condoms (coated with lubes that contain sugar, corn syrup, or other fructoses) can alter the vagina's pH, setting the stage for yeast or bacterial infection. These condoms are not recommended for vaginal or anal sex, but are okay for oral sex on men. Other "novelty" condoms, including most glow-in-the-dark, can make great gag gifts, but are not intended for use with any kind of intercourse. Unless they are labeled as FDA approved (which some are, so read carefully), these condoms do not meet the FDA standards for protection against pregnancy and STIs.

Now that you know what to look for when purchasing condoms, it's time to make your selection. Before buying "rubbers," you may want to talk with your partner about condom options, or even share the experience of selecting condoms together. Purchases can be made in a store or online. Some people are brand loyal, while others sample different brands to find their favorite. Test-driving different brands with your partner can be fun. If, however, you open a condom that looks, smells, or fits funny, throw it out and move on to the next. And be sure to take note of those expiration dates once you've made your choice(s) and before you stock up. Finally, remember that a condom is not effective unless it is on the penis before the penis enters the vagina or anus.

Best of luck in making your selections!

Alice!

Category:
- Sexual & Reproductive Health [4]
- Safer Sex [5]
- Contraception [6]
- Condoms [7]

**Related questions**

- Are thinner or ultra sensitive condoms as effective as regular ones? [8]
- Five kinds of condoms: A guide for consumers [9]
- What is a female condom? [10]
Are polyurethane condoms as effective as latex ones? [11]
Do textured condoms heighten sexual pleasure? [12]
Condom sizes... how do I know what fits? [13]

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