Dear Alice,

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE answer this question for me. Are condoms you buy from machines in the bathroom safe? What I mean is, could they carry some sort of disease or STD or anything that can make me sick (I don't mean allergies)? And also, could you tell me if American condoms are better than other countries' condoms? I read that U.S. condoms are electronically tested for defects or diseases, but I was wondering if other countries like Europe or Thailand or whatever tested their condoms, too. If I was older, I would buy condoms from boxes, but until then, I am stuck buying them from bathroom machines.

Condom Boy

Answer

Dear Condom Boy,

Fear not — you will not get a sexually transmitted infection (STI) from an unused, unopened condom, regardless of whether you purchased it from a vending machine, a drug store, your roommate, or anywhere else, for that matter. STIs can be spread in a number of ways — unprotected vaginal/oral/anal sex, contact with infected skin, use of a needle contaminated with infected blood, to name a few — but not through objects that have never been exposed to infected bodily fluids. For more information on STIs and how they're transmitted, check out the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health archive.

If you're thinking of buying condoms from a vending machine, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that you make sure of the following before spending your loose change:

- The condom is made out of latex.
- The condom is labeled for protection against HIV/AIDS and other STIs.
- The condom isn't outdated (check the expiration date listed on the package).
- The vending machine is not placed in direct sunlight or is not in a room with high temperature.
- Make sure the condoms you buy are not labeled "novelty" condoms; these condoms are mainly for laughs and do not provide the same STI and pregnancy prevention as regular condoms.

Condoms produced in the United States and in other countries are indeed tested for quality, as are condoms manufactured in other countries. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) samples all condoms before allowing them to be sold. If 4 out of every 1,000 condoms manufactured by a certain company are found to fail quality tests, the company is forbidden from selling its product in the States.

It's important to know that most condoms fail because of human error, rather than the quality of latex or where the condom is made. For more information about using condoms correctly, read the Related Q&As.

You mentioned that if you were older, you wouldn't have to buy condoms from vending machines. Regardless of your age, you can buy condoms wherever they are sold. What makes you hesitant to buy condoms from a convenience store, drug store, or supermarket? It's easier to get fresh condoms at a store. Might you be embarrassed to be seen buying condoms in public? By purchasing condoms, you're being responsible about your sexuality and demonstrating that you care about your health and the health of your partner(s) — and that's something to be proud of. Are you afraid you might be recognized by someone you know, possibly someone who would disapprove of your sexual activity? If it's important to you to keep your condom purchasing under wraps, you could buy them from a store that isn't frequented by people who might recognize you. Or, are you concerned about cost? If so, check out your local Planned Parenthood [3] which may offer free or discounted condoms. In addition, many college campuses offer access to free condoms for their students.

Wherever you get your condoms, it's great that you're planning on using them to protect yourself and your partner(s) from STIs. Once you have your hands on some (that have not expired or been exposed to extreme temperatures), enjoy!

Alice!
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