

Better information about dental dams ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I've seen the recommendations. I've seen the suggestions for do-it-yourself workaround (cutting open a condom, plastic wrap...). What I *haven't* seen is practical usage advice — how to place the thing effectively, how to overcome the limitations of losing direct contact, how to arrange things to permit vaginal penetration with fingers while still maintaining protection and so on. Best-practice condom use isn't perfectly obvious either, but at the most basic level it's pretty straightforward. If you want to build acceptance for barrier use during cunnilingus, it needs to be at least as clear and/or at least as well-documented.

Answer

Dear Reader,

You make a good point about the lack of information and discussion around the use of dental dams (or just dams), which are excellent barriers for safer oral sex. For readers who may not be as familiar with the topic, here's a brief rundown: dental dams were originally created to help dentists focus on a particular part of the mouth (i.e., a single tooth, with the remainder of the mouth covered by the dental dam) during dental procedures, but are now also used for cunnilingus (oral-vaginal contact) and anilingus (oral-to-anal contact) to create an effective barrier that helps to prevent bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens from spreading during oral sex. Whether you use a store-bought dental dam or show off your do-it-yourself (DIY) skills and make your own at home, these barriers can be used in creative and practical ways to make sex safer.

First item to tackle: proper placement of the dam. Keeping it in place can certainly be tricky, but there are options. A good method is to apply a water-based lubricant to the vulva or anus — this can help keep the barrier secured, with an added bonus of reducing friction and increasing sensation to enhance pleasure. Then, in terms of placement, make sure the dam is covering the vulva or anus, allowing for oral stimulation of these areas without coming into contact with bodily fluids or skin. Since a dam serves as a barrier between partners, it only needs to be held in place, not stretched or held tightly over the skin. It may also add to the fun to have a receiving partner hold the dam in place — this can allow the partner performing cunnilingus or anilingus to have their hands free to stimulate other areas. This dynamic also creates an experience where

both partners are actively involved. In order to prevent slippage while holding the dam, it's a good idea for the person holding the barrier to keep their hands and fingers lubricant-free.

Now, when it comes to using a dental dam, the best way to get familiar and comfortable with it is by practicing and planning ahead. Just like when using condoms, the more familiar you are with dental dams, the more confident you're likely to feel about introducing and using them during sex play. Having a nice supply of dams (and condoms) available can also help ease the transition to safer sexual activity when you're in the mood. There are lots of creative ways to incorporate them into sex play while maintaining an intimate atmosphere. For example, asking your partner to touch themselves while you slowly unwrap and apply the barrier. Another way to keep it sexy is by experimenting with different dam colors, sizes, and flavors.

Reader, you mentioned that you already know about some of the DIY methods to make your own dams. But there is one method you might not have heard of that can address your question of how to maintain protection during vaginal penetration. Try making your own dam using a latex glove! Cutting off the three 'middle fingers' of the glove allows the thumb and pinkie 'fingers' to act as either a secure "handle" or a barrier method for digital penetration. Just keep in mind that if you're going to make your own dam, it's recommended that you use powder-free latex gloves — your taste buds will thank you!

But wait, there's more! Here are some additional considerations for using dams:

- **Always check your chosen barrier for holes or tears before using it.** You can do this by holding it up to a light. Avoid trying to work around any holes or tears — it's much safer to use a brand new barrier instead.
- **Only use one side of the dam** — flipping a dental dam around to use the other side defeats the purpose of the barrier, potentially exposing the dam user to bacteria and viruses.
- **Avoid using the same dam on multiple parts of the body.** For example, moving the dam from the anus to the vulva can cause a [urinary tract infection](#) [2] because fecal matter may be transferred to the urethra, and moving the dam from the vulva to the anus could transmit genital herpes from the labia to the anus.
- **Dams are only for one-time use.** Never save a dam to reuse at a later date or time, even if you plan to use it on the same body part.
- **Dams aren't intended for insertion.** If you're looking for a barrier method for vaginal or anal penetration with fingers, try using a latex glove with some water-based lubricant or an internal condom instead.
- **Keep water-based lube on hand when using a latex dam.** Oils or oil-based lubricants can break down the latex and reduce barrier effectiveness.

Dams are a great addition to a fun, communicative, and comfortable sexual experience, all while increasing protection. Three cheers for these safer sex tools!

Alice!

Category:

[Sexual & Reproductive Health](#) [3]

[Safer Sex](#) [4]

[Sexual Questions](#) [5]

[About Oral Sex](#) [6]

Related questions

[Oral sex, STIs,... and braces](#) [7]

[What is a female \(internal\) condom?](#) [8]

[Time to go condom shopping! Brands, sizes, textures — What to buy?](#) [9]

Resources

[Alice! Health Promotion \(Morningside\)](#) [10]

[Center for Student Wellness \(CUIMC\)](#) [11]

[Safer Sex Map \(Morningside/ Barnard\)](#) [12]

Published date:

Aug 16, 2013

Last reviewed on:

Sep 23, 2016

Footer menu

▼ [Contact Alice!](#)

- [Content Use](#)
- [Media Inquiries](#)
- [Comments & Corrections](#)

▼ [Syndication & Licensing](#)

- [Licensing Q&As](#)
- [Get Alice! on Your Website](#)
- [Full Site Syndication](#)
- [Link to Go Ask Alice!](#)

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please [visit our Emergency page](#) to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/better-information-about-dental-dams-0>

Links

[1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/better-information-about-dental-dams-0>

[2] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/urinary-tract-infection-utis>

[3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexual-reproductive-health>

[4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/safer-sex>

[5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexual-questions>

[6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/about-oral-sex>

- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/oral-sex-stis-and-braces-0>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-female-internal-condom>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/time-go-condom-shopping-brands-sizes-textures-%E2%80%94-what-buy>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/alice-health-promotion-morningside>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/center-student-wellness-cuimc>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/safer-sex-map-morningside-barnard>