Differences between polyurethane and latex condoms

(1) Dear Alice,

Avanti is the make of a condom that is made from polyurethane rather than latex. I prefer this type of condom over latex as they can be thinner and they transmit heat better than latex. Recently the boxes have stickers on them warning that the condoms safety vis a vis HIV transmission is unknown. What's taking them so long? Do you have any inside information on their relative porosity?

— Prefers the Pleasures of Polyurethane

(2) Dear Alice,

Are polyurethane condoms as effective as latex ones? I bought a box of them and it says that if you are not allergic to latex, then use latex condoms. Why is this?

(3) Dear Alice,

It is recommended that latex condoms not be stored/carried in a wallet or glove compartment (among other things). Are polyurethane condoms more durable under such circumstances?

In fact, here’s a better question: do polyurethane condoms require different care, in storage or in use, than latex?

Answer

Dear Prefers the Pleasures of Polyurethane and Readers,

When it comes to personal items like condoms, it’s definitely a different-strokes-for-different-folks kind of situation. Generally, polyurethane condoms are recommended as an alternative barrier method for people who have known latex allergies and can’t use latex condoms. While the warning labels may be a little bit confusing (more on this later), this non-latex alternative has been shown to be an effective contraceptive method that are used and stored in the same way as any other condom. It also provides reliable protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), gonorrhea [2], and chlamydia (among others). Additionally, some folks prefer polyurethane condoms even if they don't have a latex
allergy. Why? Well, polyurethane condoms:

- Are thinner, which may increase sensitivity. However, they aren’t as stretchy as latex condoms, which might mean they are more prone to breaking, especially with rough handling.
- Can be safely used with both oil and water-based lubricants (oil-based lubricants can damage and reduce the effectiveness of latex condoms).
- Transmit heat more readily than other condoms, which can heighten pleasure in some users who prefer the sensation of warmth.
- Have a longer shelf-life than latex condoms.

So, then what’s the deal with the warning labels? Non-latex synthetic condoms are a more recent development and haven’t been studied as extensively as their latex counterparts. Because of this, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends polyurethane condoms for latex-sensitive or latex-allergic folks. For everyone else, the FDA recommends latex barrier methods. This may explain some of the differences in consumer labeling between the two condom types. So, if you don’t have a latex sensitivity, but prefer polyurethane condoms anyway, be assured that polyurethane condoms have been shown to provide the same level of protection as latex ones. They also adhere to the same FDA guidelines for safety and effectiveness — it’s just that these conclusions have been drawn from a comparably smaller research base.

As for proper transport and storage, while there’s little published research on polyurethane condoms specifically, you should follow the same guidelines that you would for latex condoms. For example, it's recommended that condoms be stored away from extreme temperatures, direct sunlight, humidity, and not be rubbed, compressed, or otherwise handled roughly. Like latex condoms, polyurethane condoms have expiration dates that indicate when they're no longer safe to use. If you want to keep one handy, you can put it in a loose pocket, bag, or purse, but try to avoid doing this for more than a few hours at a time (and if you're ever unsure if a condom might be past its prime, chucking it for a new one is always recommended).

Ultimately, your choice in condom type is up to you and your partner(s), based on what best suits your comfort and pleasure. And, whether you’re allergic to latex or not, there are plenty of other condom options to try out (check out the Condoms category in the Go Ask Alice! archives for more info) — polyurethane is a popular choice for many people, but it’s certainly not the only way to practice safer sex! For more tips and resources about protecting yourself against STIs and unwanted pregnancy, check out the Q&As in the Safer Sex category of the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health archives.

Alice!
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