

**February 2010**

## **Sexually transmitted infections – reducing your risk**

Travel involves many different experiences including, for some, sexual encounters. In order to minimise the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) you must be aware of the following:

- STIs are usually passed between people through intimate sexual contact - vaginal, anal or oral sex.
- STIs, including HIV infection, can be a risk, even if your partner looks well and has no symptoms.
- Use a condom correctly every time you have intimate sexual contact.
- Male and female condoms are available. Male condoms may provide slightly more protection against STIs than female condoms.
- Having several sexual partners, intimate sexual contact with commercial sex workers (prostitutes) and certain sexual practices, such as anal sex, ALL increase your risk of catching STIs.
- The best protection against STIs is abstinence.

## **Condoms**

Condoms reduce the risk of STIs being passed between sexual partners. They must be used properly and should not be used after their expiry date. Condoms are available in most countries, but standards vary. In the UK, BSI or CE kite-mark condoms are recommended and you should carry a supply of UK condoms when travelling. If you buy condoms abroad, check their expiry date and make sure they carry a recognised quality mark such as:

- European kite-mark BSEN 600.
- International Standards Organisation (ISO) mark.
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA approval).

Oil based lubricants such as baby oil, body lotions or petroleum jelly (Vaseline™) increase the risk of the condom breaking and should not be used. Water based lubricants like K-Y Jelly™ can be used safely with condoms and can be bought before travel from a UK chemist. Products are available abroad, but as with condoms, their quality cannot be guaranteed.

More information about condoms, including a guide on how to use them correctly, is available on the NHS Choices website at:

[http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Condoms-\(male-and-female\)/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Condoms-(male-and-female)/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

## **Dental Dams**

These are rectangular pieces of thin latex that can be placed over the vagina or anus to form a protective barrier during oral sex. They give limited protection against STIs. As with condoms, they are single use only and oil based lubricants (baby oil, body lotions, and petroleum jelly) can damage them and should not be used. Your local Primary Care Trust or the Terrence Higgins Trust can advise you on how to obtain dental dams. The Terrence Higgins Trust ([www.tht.org.uk/](http://www.tht.org.uk/)) also provides helpful information about most aspects of sexual health.

## Vaccinations

Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B and some strains of the genital wart virus linked to cervical cancer, called Human papillomavirus, are the only STIs that can be prevented by vaccines. It's never too late before travel to discuss these vaccinations, but you have the best chance of protection if you have them early. You can discuss this with your GP surgery, travel clinic or sexual health clinic before you go.

## Contraception

Birth control pills, injections, and diaphragms ('the cap') can be effective contraception, but **DO NOT** offer protection against STIs. Take good supplies of your usual contraception with you, but remember that condoms are the only contraceptives that **PROTECT** against STIs.

Emergency contraception, such as the "morning after" pill, can be difficult to obtain or completely unavailable in many overseas regions.

Further advice about getting contraception overseas is available from the Marie Stopes website at:  
<http://www.mariestopes.org/documents/travelguide.pdf>

## Testing for STIs

If you think you have been exposed to a STI you should seek immediate medical advice and tests, even if you do not have any symptoms. For more information, look at:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Sexually-transmitted-infections/Pages/Preventing.aspx>

You must avoid sexual all contact until tests have been carried out **AND** all the results are negative

### OR

You have completed a course of treatment **AND** your doctor has advised that it is safe for you to have sex.

You can find an NHS Sexually Transmitted Infections Clinic on the NHS Choices website at:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Talkingaboutsex/Pages/Ineedhelpnow.aspx>

## Assault

It's very important that you get urgent police and medical help after a sexual assault. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office have specific advice for travellers available on their website at:

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/when-things-go-wrong/rape>

Once you are back in the UK, you can visit a confidential Sexual Assault Referral Centre for further help and support. You can find more details on the Home Office's website at:

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/sexual-offences/sexual-assault-referral-centres/referral-centre-locations/>