**Sex, COVID-19 and Physical Distancing**

Coronavirus is changing life for all of us. It is also making people wonder if it’s safe to date or have sex during the coronavirus pandemic.

COVID-19 is a new illness that affects your lungs and airways. We need to protect ourselves, and others. We need to quickly stop it from spreading further.

Doctors and community activists produced the information below. It included PrEP doctors, the British HIV Association, HIV Scotland, the British Association for Sexual Health & HIV (BASHH), i-Base and PrEPster. This will help you make informed choices that are right for you.

The Government advice talks about social distancing. We’ll refer to social distancing as physical distancing. Reducing physical contact with people will reduce transmission of COVID-19. We need to strengthen our social connections through other means.

Physical distancing is going to be hard for everyone. Physical distancing will be different for everybody. Most importantly, you should do what you can to maintain your mental wellbeing as well as your physical health.

You should always consider the groups of people who are most at risk of acquiring COVID-19, and having a severe illness, when making decisions about the sex you might be having. [Check out NHS Inform’s website for who these groups include.](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-social-distancing) Guidance from the UK Government can be found by [clicking here.](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)

**Current government guidance urges against physical contact or travelling. Please take this into account when making decisions about meeting partners, and sex. This guidance is designed to stop the spread of coronavirus. Even if you don’t have symptoms, you might be passing it on to other people.**

If you have any questions about Sex, physical distancing and coronavirus, please call the HIV Scotland helpline on 0131 558 3713.

**Can I have sex during the outbreak?**

You can have sex, but you might want to think about the impact of COVID-19 on you and your partners, and take extra precautions to lower the risk of STIs whilst the NHS might not be able to test or treat you as quickly as you’re used to.

The advice for physical distancing is designed to stop the spread of COVID-19. It involves reducing physical contact to break the onward transmission of COVID-19. Even if you don’t get the symptoms, or get mild symptoms – you might pass it on to someone who could get far more severe symptoms.

There is much more to sex, romance and attraction than just physical contact. You might want to get acquainted with new partners through technology, or open your bottom drawer and use the toys you bought but haven’t got around to using yet. There are lots of options to maintaining your sex drive and ensuring you get pleasure to keep your mental wellbeing strong.

Don’t forget that masturbating can be a good source of comfort in this time of stress.

**IMPORTANT**: If you, someone you live with, or someone you’ve had sex with recently has had symptoms of COVID-19 (these include a new cough or fever) then we are advising that you should self-isolate for 14 days to prevent further transmissions. Self-isolating means no physical contact – so no physical sex.

**Can coronavirus be sexually transmitted?**

COVID-19 will certainly be a sexually associated infection.

If you’re close enough to have sex it’s likely that you’re close enough to transmit COVID-19 through water droplets. Kissing is one of the main routes of infection for COVID-19.

Even if you don’t kiss your partner, COVID-19 can be transmitted through breathing near each other – and you’re likely to be touching the same surfaces as other people in the bedroom.

**Can I keep having sex with an existing partner that I live with?**

If you’re living with someone and sharing a bed with them – it doesn’t really matter if you’re having sex. If one of you has or has had COVID-19, then the other will have been exposed to it.

If you two want to have sex, then you shouldn’t let fears of coronavirus get in the way.

Regardless, if one of you has symptoms, or tests positive, [you should follow guidance on self-isolation.](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-stay-at-home-advice)

**Can I keep having sex with an existing partner that I don’t live with?**

**IMPORTANT:** The latest government advice urges people to remain physically distant from people – 2 metres away from people you are in contact with. The advice says you should not travel unless necessary or urgent. This guidance is designed to stop ongoing transmission of COVID-19.

The risk of COVID-19 is based on how much physical distancing you’re both practicing. Are you both working from home? Are you only dating/having sex with each other?

If you decide to have sex, and you’ve both been physically distant from others, you’re mostly risking each other. If you or your partner are interacting with different people; you should consider the additional risk of transmitting COVID-19, or becoming a carrier which may transmit it to people at heightened risk.

If you are having sex, just consider how that choice can affect not just you, but anyone that you come in to contact with who might be more vulnerable.

You might also consider jumping on the phone or video call with your partner for now to limit the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

**Can I meet new people?**

Staying at home for days is a great time to spruce up your dating profiles and meet new people – but with bars and restaurants closed, you might need to think about new ways of getting to know people.

You could try video chatting or getting deep into long messages. Jump over onto Netflix Party to watch a film together or turn your camera on to record when you’re playing with toys. You can then look forward to the opportunity to meet up and play skin-to-skin in future.

If you’re planning to meet up with someone, it’s reasonable to cancel if either of you have symptoms (a new cough or a fever)

**IMPORTANT:** You should also consider the latest government advice on travelling – currently this is urging against all travel & physical contact unless urgent or necessary.

**Do you have any tips for maintaining social contact whilst distancing to prevent COVID-19?**

You might want to do something good in your community - you could either help out your neighbours who might be self-isolating, or you could volunteer for HIV Scotland to call people who might not have anyone else to check in.

Other people turn to gaming, reading, learning a new language or getting on YouTube to learn a new at-home fitness routine.

Many people need some form of touch or human contact – and that shouldn’t be treated as a failure, and you shouldn’t feel shame. Just make sure you can do it as safely as possible for you and those around you.

**How can I make sex as safe as possible from STIs?**

There are a number of ways to have safer sex.

If you are HIV negative, and you’re looking to prevent HIV:

* having sex with partners who have HIV and an undetectable viral load means there is no way of transmitting HIV.
* PrEP is another option to prevent HIV, although if you’re not currently on PrEP you might have to wait a while to get it due to the pressure on the NHS. If you’d like to start quickly, you can buy PrEP online. To learn how to buy PrEP online, and start safely – [check out PrEPsters website here.](https://prepster.info/buying-prep-online/)

Condoms are the single best prevention method to prevent STIs and HIV, but you should remember that STIs such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia can be transmitted through sucking, swallowing and rimming.

Remember that you might not be able to get an STI test as quickly as you might be used to.

**What if I need an STI test during the COVID-19 outbreak?**

If you’ve been at risk within the last 24-72 hours, you might be able to prevent HIV infection by taking PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis). This is a course of medication that might prevent you becoming HIV-positive. You need to start PEP ideally within 24 hours of the risk, and no later than 72 hours. The longer you wait, the less chance there is of PEP working.

You can get PEP from a sexual health clinic or hospital A&E department. A doctor will advise you if PEP is suitable for you based on the level of risk. [For more information about PEP, click here.](https://www.hiv.scot/Pages/FAQs/Category/pep)

If you need to access an STI test, you might have to wait a bit longer than you are used to. This is because many clinics are scaling back the level of testing to focus on people who are very sick. If you don’t have any symptoms, you might not be able to access a regular screening test.

If you have symptoms for an STI, you should phone your nearest clinics. Use SX’s Service Finder to find your nearest sexual health service. [Click here to head over to their page.](https://s-x.scot/service-finder/)

[Click here if you need a service in England](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/sexual-health/find-a-sexual-health-clinic). [Click here if you need a service in Wales.](https://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/LocalServices/?s=sexualhealth)