WHAT IS SAFER SEX?

Origins of “safer sex”
The phrase “safer sex” itself did not emerge until the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. In “How to Have Sex in an Epidemic”, AIDS activists Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen introduced the concept of “safer sex” as methods gay men could use to reduce the possibility of infecting one another with the pathogen causing AIDS (later identified as HIV). Today “safer sex”, based on the understanding that having sex brings some level of risk and that people can be proactive about minimizing this risk, is widely recommended as a practice for sexually active people.

STI risks and risk reduction
Many people think of oral sex or anal sex as safer sex because pregnancy cannot occur. Yet engaging in any intimate contact in which you or others are exposed to body fluids (vaginal fluids, semen, blood, and pre-ejaculate) carries risks for all partners. Barrier methods (e.g. condoms, dental dams, gloves) prevent STI (sexually transmitted infection) transmission by blocking the exchange of body fluids.

Some STIs, such as HPV (human papilloma virus) and herpes, can be transmitted via skin-to-skin contact through warts/sores that may not be visible or covered by barriers. Employing practices such as using barriers makes sex safer, not safe. The risks of getting STIs are lower when using protection but don’t completely disappear.

Some great ways to have safer sex
- Use barrier methods (with lubricant) correctly and consistently on body parts or toys involved in any type of sex
- Get immunized against some viral STIs (e.g. Hepatitis B and HPV)
- Get a full screening for STIs (and get treatment if you test positive):
  - at least once a year
  - before starting a new sexual relationship
  - after having unprotected sex
  - if you think your partner has an STI
- Choose intimate acts that don’t involve exposure to others’ body fluids (e.g. solitary sex, phone sex, cuddling, etc.)
- Make lifestyle choices such as:
  - avoiding sex when drinking alcohol or using drugs
  - having mutually exclusive sexual relationships
  - limiting number of partners

Safer sex is better sex
Safer sex practices can seem challenging, unfun and unsexy — focused on the negative. Instead of thinking of safer sex as a list of things that you have to do or should not do, think of it as a way to practice self-care and care for others.

Sex is about intimacy, eroticism, fantasy, and desire, and we engage in it for pleasure and connection. Make it a habit to communicate openly with your partners and incorporate safe practices into sex play.