

## **Condom Sense at Caltech**

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Proper and consistent use of condoms makes common sense for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy. For the purposes of this article, we are going to focus on condoms and preventing STIs. Your student health center and health educator can provide important information and products to help you enjoy a healthy, disease-free sexual relationship. STIs are a reality on our campus and on most college campuses throughout the country. With the holiday season around the corner, so too, are lots of parties and social gatherings, and the possibility of meeting someone special. Love may be in the air, but sex and alcohol are not too far behind.

In the 2004 Caltech health survey, 48% of Caltech students reported not being sexually active. We all know this is the only way to avoid contracting an STI – to abstain from all forms of sexual activity (oral, anal and vaginal). Of the students who reported being sexually active, 24% did not use a condom the last time they had vaginal intercourse. As your health care providers, we would like to see all sexually active students use condoms, which still offer the most reliable protection against STIs (including HIV), assuming they are used properly and consistently. If you are sexually active, you can minimize your risk of contracting an STI by limiting the number of partners, using latex condoms (or dental dams) during each sexual act, or by being in a mutually monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner. Open and honest communication about past sexual history and expectations is crucial to having a fulfilling, positive, and healthy relationship.

In a 2002 Centers for Disease Control & Prevention survey, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/disease.info.htm>, 50% of people ages 15-24 years will contract an STI – and become one of the 19 million new cases diagnosed each year. Human Papillomavirus (HPV), trichomoniasis and Chlamydia are the three most prevalent STIs. These are serious infections with serious consequences. Women experience the greatest burden of STIs, suffering more frequent and serious effects. Women with HPV are at increased risk for cervical cancer. Chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) which can cause chronic pelvic pain and infertility. Information is important. Please come to the health center and see one of the nurse practitioners or physicians for a thorough physical examination and discussion of your specific needs. This can prevent unwanted problems. Confidential STI testing is available for a fee at the student health center and can be done at the time of your visit. You and the nurse practitioner will determine what kind of testing is needed for you based on your sexual history and physical signs and symptoms.

Experiencing sexual intimacy is fun and meaningful but still risky if proper measures are not taken. Knowledge about sexual relationships is as important in your college years as is knowledge about physics, math, geology, etc... Male condoms are available at no cost in the following offices: Student Health center, Health Education, Women's Center, Campus Life (RA's get house supplies) and the Health Advocates carry a very limited supply in their first aid bags. To minimize breakage, keep them in a cool, dry place (not in your wallet), check the expiration date and consider using a water based lubricant, like KY jelly. Vaseline will render the condom ineffective and should not be used. All condoms sold in the US are regulated by the FDA and have to meet strict guidelines for testing. Overwhelmingly, breakage issues tend to be due to improper use. We encourage you to visit the Caltech Health Education website and learn more about proper condom use under the Sexual Health link - 'The ABCs of Condoms'.

We also have available FDA approved female condoms (used during vaginal intercourse) and dental dams (a 6"x6" latex barrier used during oral-genital sex or when performing oral-anal sex or rimming). Due to the cost, we do not leave these in open spaces. For those few students who are allergic

to latex, polyurethane condoms will be available at the health center soon. If you have an allergy to latex or are concerned about a possible latex allergy, proper laboratory testing can be done to confirm or refute this. A nurse practitioner can provide more detailed information if needed.

### **Helpful Resources**

- American Social Health Association [http://www.ashastd.org/condom/condom\\_overview.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/condom/condom_overview.cfm)
- Caltech Health Education [http://www.healtheducation.caltech.edu/sexual\\_health.htm](http://www.healtheducation.caltech.edu/sexual_health.htm)
- Caltech Student Health Center <http://www.healthcenter.caltech.edu/services.html>
- Centers for Disease and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/std/>
- Call the CDC STD Hotline: 800-227-8922 (Talk with someone 24/7 that can answer your questions).
- Undercovercondoms <http://www.undercovercondoms.com/> is a good source for those seeking a variety of condoms, lubricants and other safer sex products.

In closing, we expect some students to be sexually active during their college years. We want you to be knowledgeable about proper and consistent condom use and how they prevent STIs. As always, feel free to send comments or questions via email, or better yet, come in and talk with us. We are here to help you and answer your questions.