

A Guide to Sexual Health for Young Gay and Bisexual Men

Introduction

This booklet is for young gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men. It provides you with up-to-date information on safer sex and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

It is not to be used in place of the professional medical care, advice, diagnosis or treatment of a doctor, but it will help you to think about your own sexual health and the ways in which you can reduce your risk of infection when you do have sex with other men.

What is sexual health?

Sexual health is about having a positive, informed and respectful approach to your sexuality and the sexuality of others, and having a positive, informed and respectful approach to your sexual relationships and those of others.

It is also about having pleasurable and safer sexual experiences, which do not involve violence, discrimination of any kind, or make you feel under pressure to do something sexual that you are not comfortable with.

Pressure to have sex

Many young people, especially men, feel pressure to have sex before they are ready. This pressure may come from friends, partners, or even from society generally. This is unsurprising since sex is everywhere in our society. From newspapers to magazines, music to film, books to websites – there is no escaping the fact that the whole world is talking about sex.

However, sexual health is a different matter. It's something we rarely talk about, despite it being one of the most important things we need to consider before having sex.

Red Light or Real Life?

If, like many people, you got most of your sex education from porn sites or Hollywood films, it's unlikely that you were taught how to take care of your sexual health.

When was the last time you saw actors reaching for the condoms just before “doing it” right in front of your eyes? Did the characters in your romantic novel talk about keeping each other safe from sexually transmitted infections (STIs)? Have you heard soap stars

talk about “genitor-urinary medicine” on EastEnders or Coronation Street? Do the models use condoms in your favourite porn magazines?

Film, television, and the media in general present a distorted image of human sexuality, often featuring storylines based on fictional sex where the models or actors have chiselled six-packs, huge penises, and baby-oiled, tanned bodies, enjoying hot, sensual sex before ending with simultaneous orgasms, as they gaze into each others’ eyes. Not bad for two people who have probably just met each other ten minutes before the shoot!

Reality sex isn’t just as “perfect” away from the choreographed, edited scenes, and air-brushed bodies of the media. Moreover, you need to stop, take time, and think about some important questions before you begin to have sex with others.

Am I ready?



As you become aware of your sexual feelings and attraction to others, it’s natural and normal to be interested and excited about having sex with other people. But it’s also normal to feel worried or confused about it. Regardless of your sexual orientation, it’s important to remember that it is illegal to have sex with anyone if

you are under the age of 16 years old in Northern Ireland. However, this legal age is not necessarily the right age to start having sex.

There are many pressures for young people to have sex. Some want to find out what it's all about, while others want to do it because their friends think it's cool. You may also feel pressure from the person you are dating to have sex, or you may get caught up in the romantic feelings and believe that having sex is the best way to prove your love for him. However, when you meet someone you like, it might take weeks, months or even years before you're both ready for sex. Take it slow, and think about your feelings, as well as theirs. Never rush or push each other into it.

Doing things because you've been pressured into it is never a good idea. Think about what you want, and what you feel happy about doing, and don't go any further than that, whatever your friends or your partner tell you to do.

You might not always realise that you're being put under pressure, but if any of the things below apply to you, then you could be.

- You feel like it's easier to have sex than to say no.
- You feel you're being pushed into having sex.
- All your friends say they've had sex so you feel like you should.
- You're afraid you'll lose your boyfriend, or that he won't love you any more if you don't have sex with him.
- You've been drinking or taking drugs to help you feel more confident.

It might help to know that these are the facts:

- Most people aren't having sex under 16 - studies show that most people wait until they're at least 16 to have sex – and some wait much longer.
- Being in love doesn't mean you have to have sex and having

sex doesn't mean you're in love!

- Saying no to sex is a sign of confidence and maturity.

How do I tell him I'm not ready?

Remember that it is OK to say “no”, and it’s OK to want to wait until you are both ready to have sex. Don’t give in to pressure. Even if you’ve had sex before, this doesn’t mean you have to do it again. It’s up to you every time.

If he says, "If you really loved me you would", you must recognise that he is most likely trying to manipulate you. Manipulation, particularly when it comes to sex, is not a sign of a healthy relationship, and you may want to reconsider dating this person. Other ways in which a person might try and use manipulation include:

- telling you that he will “break up” with you if you won't do what he wants.
- blaming you for getting him aroused.
- trying to get you drunk or under the influence of drugs so that you do not have the ability to say no.
- telling you that it is what other couples are doing and that you are not normal.
- threatening to spread rumours that you are not "good in bed" or that you are frigid, or that you did it with him anyway.
- offering a relationship to you if you will have sex with them.
saying that he won't enjoy sex if he is “made” to wear a condom.
- saying "you have had sex with me before, what is the problem now?"
- saying that other forms of sexual activity are not 'real sex' anyway so they don't matter.

Your first time should be with someone you care about, someone you trust and someone you feel comfortable with. If your

boyfriend truly cares about you, he will respect your wish not to rush or force you into having sex.

If you are forced to have sex, this is called “sexual assault” or “rape”, and it is important to let someone know what has happened to you. Contact The Rainbow Project for information, counselling, and support if you have been forced to have sex.

What if I feel ready?

If you do feel ready to have sex, take some time to learn about the different “types” of sex you can have, how to use condoms correctly, where to get them, and how they can protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

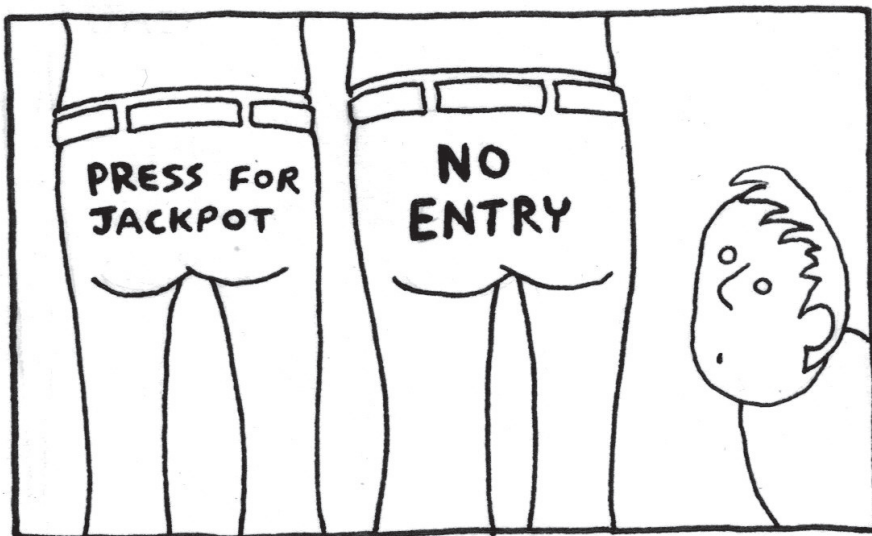


Different types of sex

“Gay sex”, or more accurately, sex with other men, is not just about anal sex. Sex is a sensual, emotional experience about exploring and experiencing pleasure that does not have to include penetration in order for it to be enjoyable. In fact, surveys conducted by the Terence Higgins Trust have shown that 1 in 5 gay men choose not to have anal sex.

There are many different ways to enjoy sex and be intimate with another person including kissing, cuddling, massaging, touching, giving/receiving blowjobs, rimming, fingering, using sex toys, mutual masturbation, etc.

Remember though that it is still possible to become infected with an STI even if you choose not to have penetrative (anal) sex.



What are STIs?

STIs are a range of infections easily passed on during sexual contact. There are lots of STIs out there and you will probably already have heard of some like chlamydia, gonorrhoea, public lice (crabs), anal/genital warts, HIV, scabies, syphilis, hepatitis, etc (see table below in middle pages).

They are caused by bacteria in blood, semen (cum), vaginal fluids, saliva, or on the skin, and are passed on from the penis, vagina, mouth, skin-to-skin contact, or by sharing sex toys. Some STIs can have no symptoms. If you don't know you are infected and you don't get treated, you can be storing up some serious long-term health problems.

The table in the middle pages lists some of the more common STIs but is not an exhaustive list of all sexually transmitted infections.

Who is at risk?

If you are sexually active (having sex with other people), you are at risk of getting an STI. The more sex partners you have, the higher the risk of coming into contact with someone who is infected with an STI.

How do I know if I have an STI?

If you are infected with an STI, you may not develop any symptoms at all. An STI check-up is the only way to diagnose any of these infections. However, STIs can produce a wide range of symptoms including:

- Discharge from your penis or anus.
- Pain when peeing.
- Discomfort or pain in the anus.
- Swollen balls (testicles)
- Ulcers/blisters/sores or growths in or around your penis or anus.
- Rashes.
- Itching or irritation in the penis or anus.
- Sore throat.
- Fever and feeling ill.
- Inflamed and swollen lymph glands in the groin.

How can I avoid infection?

There is no guaranteed way of avoiding STIs, but there are some tips that you can follow to reduce your risk of being infected:

Using a condom when you have sex is the most effective way to reduce your risk of picking up or passing on an STI, including HIV. A condom acts as a barrier and stops body fluids from mixing during oral or anal sex.

STI	What is it?	How is it transmitted?	Symptoms	How is it treated
Public Lice (Crabs)	Tiny parasitic insects found in the genital areas as well as other parts of the body. They live in pubic hair and body hair.	Close body contact usually during sex. Can also be transmitted by sharing clothing or bedding with infected person. Symptoms and signs usually show up after several weeks.	Inflammation, irritation, and/or intense itchiness in and around the pubic region.	Special lotions/shampoos applied to the affected areas. Clothing and bedding should be washed.
Scabies	Small mites that burrow into the skin.	Not always transmitted sexually. Skin to skin contact. Can also be transmitted via bedding or clothing with an infected person. Symptoms will appear around 4 weeks after infestation.	Itchiness, especially at night on any part of body (except head and central back). A rash may also appear.	Special lotions applied to whole body and cream to relieve itching. Clothing and bedding should be washed.
Genital Warts	Caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).	Transmitted via close skin contact usually during unprotected sex. Sometimes there is no identified source of transmission of the virus. Symptoms can recur.	Visible warts/cauliflower-like clusters (can be single or multiple) in genital area, penis and/or anus. May be itchy.	Small warts can be removed with nitrogen (freezing), diathermy (heat) or a chemical paint. Usually a few treatments are needed as there is a risk of warts
Herpes	Caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of HSV: Type 1 is usually found around the lips and is commonly known as a cold sore. Type 2 is usually found around the genital or anal areas.	Transmitted via close skin contact including unprotected sex. Sometimes contracted even when people have no symptoms of the virus. Can be transmitted from mouth to genitals during oral sex. Symptoms appear 3-10 days after contact.	Blisters on the genitals which usually burst leaving sore ulcers, painful urinating, swelling of glands, soreness/irritation. The first attack may be the worst. Recurrent episodes are usually less severe and of shorter duration.	Medication cream for mild cases i.e. cold sores. Antiviral tablets, saline baths for pain relief. No known cure so can recur. Sexual contact should be avoided from the first indication of an infection until the skin has returned to normal.
Balanitis	Inflammation of the head of the penis (caused from an overgrowth of organisms which are normally present on the skin of the head of the penis).	Not always sexually transmitted. Usually occurs in uncircumcised men (as the environment under the foreskin is warm and moist which favours the growth of organisms). More likely to occur if you have not washed for a couple of days.	Spots, rash, itching, discharge, pain during sex, difficulty urinating, swelling and/or inflammation of foreskin.	Anti-fungal cream; saline baths; washing with soap and warm water; good skin care.
Non-Specific Urethritis (NSU)	An infection that causes an inflammation of the male urethra contracted by a bacteria or virus.	Usually sexually transmitted. Symptoms appear 2 weeks after contact.	Milky pus-like discharge from the penis, burning when urinating, painful ejaculations, itching, tingling, irritation inside the penis, pelvic pain and/or sore testicles. Some	Antibiotics.
Chlamydia	Caused by a bacteria which can affect the penis, urethra, anus, rectum and less commonly the throat and eyes.	Sexually transmitted or transmitted via fingers from genitals to the eyes. Symptoms appear 2-3 weeks after contact but might not show for years.	In many cases it has no symptoms. Discharge from tip of penis, pain when urinating and/or pain/swelling of testicles if left untreated.	Antibiotics.
Gonorrhoea	A bacterial infection of the genitals, throat or rectum.	Sexually transmitted. Symptoms appear 3-5 days after contact with infection.	Yellow discharge from penis, irritation/discharge from anus, pain in the testicles or when urinating. Most men	Antibiotics.
Syphilis	Caused by a bacterial infection. If left untreated can result in very serious complications (including damage to the heart, brain)	Sexually transmitted.	Single, painless clear ulcer usually on the genitals, enlargement of glands in groin, rash on body, flu-like illness, hair loss. There may be no symptoms.	Antibiotic injections.
Hepatitis A	A viral infection that affects the liver.	Can be sexually transmitted but more commonly through contaminated food or water, not washing hands after the toilet or before touching food.	Dark urine, mild flu-like symptoms, vomiting, abdominal pain, yellowing of the skin and whites of eyes. Often no symptoms.	No known cure – long term medical supervision required. Bed rest and adequate fluids. Alcohol and some other drugs should be avoided. Can be immunised
Hepatitis B	A viral infection that affects the liver.	Sexually transmitted. Symptoms appear 4 weeks to 6 months after transmission. Very common in Africa, Asia, South America.	Flu-like symptoms, fever, dark urine, pale bowel movements, loss of appetite, night sweats, whites of eyes and skin may go yellow indicating jaundice. Can have no symptoms.	Drug treatment may be effective for some carriers. Long term medical supervision is required for people with chronic Hepatitis B. Alcohol and some other drugs should be avoided. Can be immunised for
Hepatitis C	A viral infection that affects the liver.	Transmitted via infected blood (sharing needles, syringes, etc) and rarely through sexual contact.	Mild flu-like symptoms, tiredness, nausea, abdominal pain, dark urine, yellowing of the skin and whites of eyes. Often no symptoms.	No known cure – long term medical supervision required. Rest, exercise and a well balanced diet avoiding alcohol and drugs. There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C. Some antiviral treatments are now available
HIV	HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus which damages the immune system and can lead to serious infections. AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is a late form of infection with HIV.	Sexually transmitted and can also be transmitted via blood i.e. transfusions, needles.	Most people develop a glandular fever like illness (fever, sweats, diarrhoea, rash, mouth ulcers) between one and six weeks after becoming infected with HIV. This may last a few days to a few weeks. Many have no symptoms for several years.	There is still no known cure. The most effective form of treatment is a combination of antiviral therapy, which attacks HIV directly.

- Always use a water- or silicon-based lubricant (such as ID Glide, Wet Stuff, KY Gel) for penetration, especially if you have anal sex. Never use oil-based lubes like baby-oil, Vaseline, etc as these will damage the condom.
- Flavoured condoms can be used for oral sex and will reduce the risk of infection. Remember though, that lip balms/gloss are oil-based which can damage condoms.
- Use a dental dam for rimming. Dental dams are small squares of latex which work well as a barrier during sex involving contact between the mouth and the anus.
- Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A & B. Your GP or your local genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinic can provide these vaccinations, sometimes free of charge.
- Avoid contact with body fluids like cum, pre-cum, piss, blood or any type of sore during sexual contact.
- Do not share fingers, hands or sex toys, vibrators, etc during sexual contact. If you want to finger your partner, use a latex glove or put a condom around your finger to reduce the risk of infection.

You can get FREE condoms, lube and dental dams from all kinds of places including:

- The Rainbow Project
- GUM Clinics
- Family planning centres
- Brook

You can also buy condoms, lube and dental dams from:

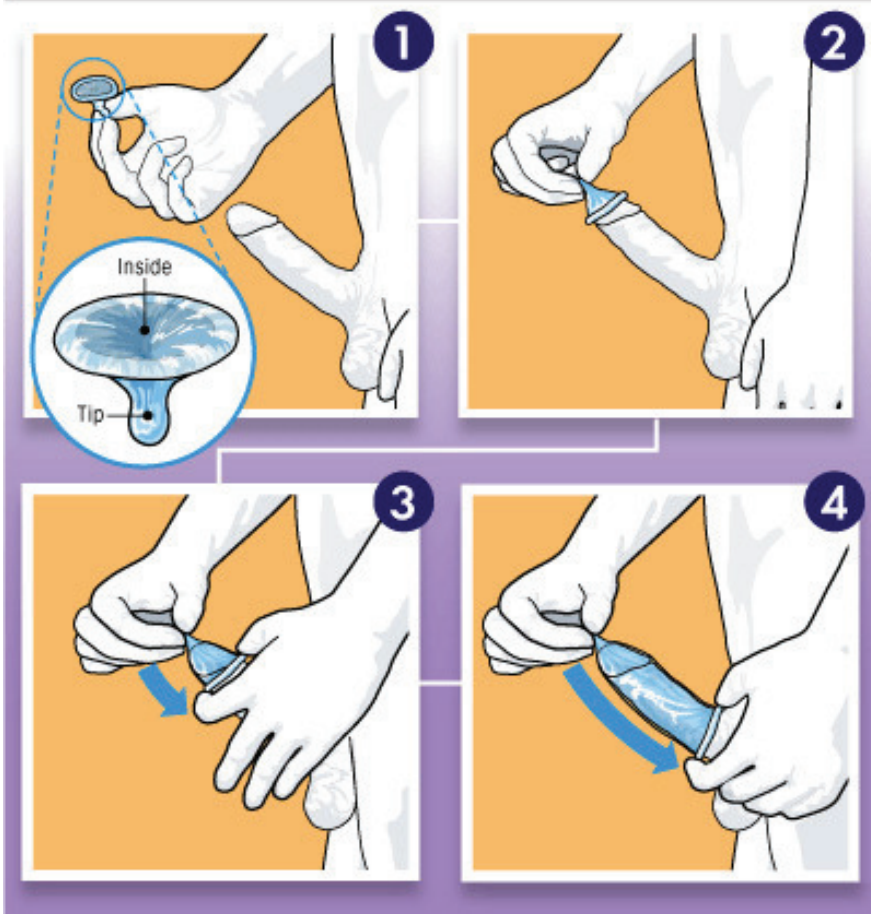
- Chemists
- Petrol stations
- Machines in public toilets, bars and clubs

How to use condoms and lube correctly

There are many different types of condoms – trim, regular, large, and extra-large sizes, as well as flavoured, extra-strength, dotted, ribbed, and non-latex brands. What you use depends on your own personal preference, however, it is important that you learn how to use condoms correctly to ensure that they don't break, rip or split during sex.

- Check that the condoms have the BSI or CE kitemark on the pack (this says they have been tested to a high standard).
- Take the condom out of the packet, checking the use-by date on the packet first and making sure there are no rips in it.
- Watch out for sharp nails, jewelley and teeth!
- Make sure the condom is put on the penis as soon as it is erect (hard), before it goes near anyone's mouth or anus. This is because the penis can release a clear, runny liquid during arousal (called pre-cum) that may contain semen or bacteria.
- Pinch the tip of the condom between your thumb and forefinger to get rid of any air.
- Lower the condom onto the penis head, still holding the teat at the top. Use your other hand to roll the condom down the penis all the way to the base.
- If you're using a water-based lubricant, now is the time to coat the condom. But be careful of oil-based lubricants or products as they can disintegrate the condom.
- Check the condom is in place throughout sex.
- After ejaculation (coming), hold the condom on at the base until the penis is withdrawn and then take it off, wrap it in tissue and bin it (not down the toilet).
- Always use a brand new condom if you have any sexual contact again - they can only be used once.

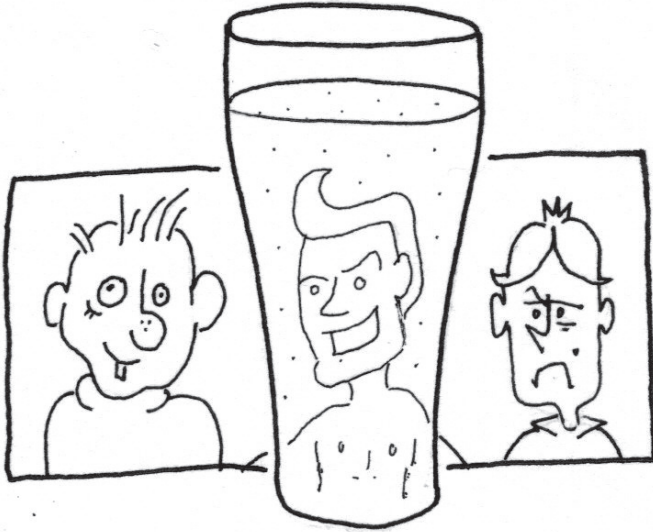
How Condoms Work



Allergic to latex?

If you're allergic or sensitive to latex, you might experience a skin rash, dry skin, itching, and in rare cases, welts. People with latex allergies can use polyurethane condoms. You can use polyurethane gloves instead of latex ones, and plastic wrap instead of latex dental dams. Non-latex safer sex materials are available from The Rainbow Project, Brook, GUM clinics, family planning services, etc.

Sex with alcohol or drugs



Some men use drugs and/or alcohol before having sex.

Alcohol and drugs can make you lose your inhibitions (make you less shy), cloud your judgement and sometimes make you completely forget what you did when you were drunk or “out of it”. Your response times are reduced and you are more likely to take risks. You may have trouble getting, or keeping an erection, and you may find it difficult to reach orgasm.

Alcohol/drugs can make some people feel sad, angry, temperamental or even violent. This can lead to intentional or unintentional self-harm or leave you more vulnerable to being robbed, attacked or sexually assaulted.

Mixing sex and alcohol/drugs can increase your risk of getting an STI because you may be more likely to have unprotected sex.

Unprotected sex

Condoms are the most effective and most reliable way of preventing the spread of STIs and HIV if you have oral or anal sex with men. There are lots of misunderstandings about sex without condoms. Some guys think things are safer than they really are, some guys do things because they think they are being safe when they really aren't. Some may feel under pressure to have unprotected sex because "it feels better", makes sex more "intimate" or shows your "trust" towards your partner. Whether it's a casual partner, or a long-term boyfriend, it is important to discuss using condoms with the men you have sex with.

How to tell your partner you want to use condoms

Wanting to use condoms is nothing to feel ashamed about. By choosing safer sex, you are showing him that you are mature, sensible, and care about your own, and his, physical health.

Before you decide to have sex, or begin having sex, sit down with your partner and discuss what you are/are not comfortable doing and tell him that you would like to use a condom. If he does not want to use condoms, be prepared to decline having sex with him. The bottom line is that you significantly increase your chances of becoming infected with STIs and HIV if you have unprotected sex.

What should I do if I've had unprotected sex or become infected with an STI?

If you have had unprotected sex or think you may have an STI, it is important to be tested by your GP or at your local genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinic.

GUM clinics offer a free and confidential testing service. Some clinics operate an appointment system while others are on a drop-in basis.

What happens at the GUM clinic?

A doctor or health advisor will talk to you about your risk of infection and any symptoms you may have, and arrange for you to have any necessary tests.

You may need to have a physical examination of your penis, testicles and anus. Swabs will be taken from the penis, anus or mouth to check for any bacterial infections such as NSU (non-specific urethritis) or gonorrhoea. A blood sample will be taken from your arm to test for syphilis, hepatitis, and HIV. You may be asked to provide a urine sample to test for chlamydia.

PEP – Post Exposure Prophylaxis

Depending on your level of risk and the type of sex you have had, you may be offered PEP treatment, particularly if you have had unprotected anal sex. PEP is a treatment that might stop a person becoming infected with HIV after it's got into their body. It needs to be taken within 72 hours of becoming exposed to HIV, however, it is not a “morning-after” pill or an alternative to using condoms.

PEP treatment is taken for one month and may have many side effects. It is not a cure for HIV and is not available to everyone. Your local sexual health clinic will be able to provide more information on PEP. You must remember that PEP has to be taken within 72 hours. It is available at GUM facilities and Accident and Emergency departments.

What if I have an STI?

If you test positive for an STI infection like syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia or NSU, it's important not to panic! Most STIs are easily and effectively treated and cured using antibiotics, creams or other treatments. You will be given this treatment at the GUM clinic and may be asked to return for further tests to ensure that the medication has successfully treated the infection.

If you don't feel in control, or if you are experiencing particular problems with sex, you may wish to discuss these issues with a trained professional. Some examples of these problems may include:

- if you're finding it difficult to have safer sex and not using condoms.
- If you're avoiding sex.
- If you're experiencing pain during sex.
- If you're having problems getting or maintaining an erection.
- If you're not enjoying sex.
- If you're concerned that you're having too much sex.

The Rainbow Project provides a professional, confidential counselling service for men who have sex with men. You can make an appointment to see a counsellor if you are concerned about any aspect of your sex life.

Enjoying sex

Sex is great – it is something to be enjoyed. This guide is not intended to rain on anyone's parade by saying there are risks involved. However, the more informed you are about the risks, the easier it will be for you to navigate them. All STIs are preventable, but not all are curable and some cause long term damage to your health – it's worth it, therefore, to take care of your sexual health.

More information

The following organisations can provide you with more information about sexual health and safer sex.

The Rainbow Project www.rainbow-project.org

Brook Northern Ireland www.brook.org.uk

Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI) www.glyni.org.uk



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