

# Accessing Sexual Health and Contraception Services during COVID-19

## ◆ Important information about sexual health clinics during lockdown:

In line with national guidance, to reduce the number of patients in the waiting room, sexual health clinics are **only providing essential services - emergency contraception and urgent sexual health and HIV services**. Sit and wait clinics have been suspended until further notice, so you should not just turn up at a clinic unless you have been given an appointment. If you are concerned about your sexual health or HIV, should call **0300 300 3030** to discuss. If your situation is identified as an emergency you will be telephone triaged and seen in clinic where appropriate. **Please do not go to a clinic if you have any COVID-19 symptoms**. For further information please read the **'What should I do if I'm worried about my sexual health?'** section below.

## ◆ Why is good sexual health important?

Taking care of your sexual health is always important, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, because sexual ill health can result not only in sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV and unintended pregnancies, but it can also have a negative impact on your mental and physical health too. **The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual health as: 'a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality - it is not just the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.'**

## ◆ Sex and Sexual Health during COVID 19

Sex and intimate contact can be great ways to reduce stress as long as you are doing this safely and within the national guidelines. Although you might not feel particularly interested in sex right now and that's okay too.

National guidelines state that to protect ourselves and others from COVID-19 we should keep a 2 metre distance between anyone who is not living in our household, therefore, you should not be holding hands, kissing or having any kind of intimate contact with a partner who does not live with you. If either you or your partner that you're isolating with haven't had a recent sexual health check-up then it's important to still practice safe sex. Condoms are the only form of protection that will protect you from STIs. If you need free condoms

Masturbation also referred to as 'wanking' or 'playing with yourself' or 'touching yourself' is one of the safest ways to feel sexual pleasure and it poses no risk because it only involves yourself! Just make sure to wash your hands, sex toys and devices before and after.

You might find our **'Safe Sex & Healthy Relationships Information & Tips during COVID-19'**, helpful.

## ◆ What should I do if I'm worried about my sexual health?

Take some time to do some research about what it is you are worrying about. If you look online, try to use reliable sources of information because not everything on the internet is accurate. There are some really helpful and trustworthy websites out there for some of the more frequently asked questions or worries. Please see the **'Support & Information'** at the end of this factsheet.

If you are worried that you may have an STI but **are not showing any symptoms**, you can order a free testing kit online through the iCaSH website. You may also be able to order a testing kit from THT and Freetest.me depending on the area where you live and your age. Some pharmacies have STI testing kits which you can order but will need to pay for.

If you are **showing symptoms** of an STI then follow the information in the **'Important information'** section at the top of this factsheet. If you have had sexual or intimate contact with a person who is not from your household, who is **showing symptoms**, then you should self-isolate for 14 days (this is because it can take up to 14 days for your own possible symptoms to show). If you begin showing symptoms during these 14 days, you should isolate for 7 days from the day that the symptoms appear.

## ◆ What will happen with my contraception?

With lots on your mind, feeling confident about your contraception and how to access it, is extremely important! You should continue to use the following contraception as you normally would:

- ◇ The contraceptive pill (the combined pill or the mini pill)
- ◇ The contraceptive patch
- ◇ Vaginal ring
- ◇ Contraceptive injection (depo shot)

## Accessing Sexual Health and Contraception Services during COVID-19 (cont)

When you become aware that you are running low then you should contact your regular service and make them aware that you need a repeat prescription. If you are not able to access the contraceptive injection at this time for whatever reason, your GP or sexual health clinic can give you advice on alternative contraception.

If you have a **long term acting method of contraception (LARC) such as Copper Coil (IUD); Hormonal Coil (IUS); Implant**, you will continue to be protected against pregnancy until it is due to be replaced. If your LARC is due to be replaced, you should call your GP or sexual health clinic to talk about your options. Some brands have been licenced to be used for longer than normal, **but not all of them**, so please make sure that you check this out with your GP or sexual health clinic. If it isn't one which has been licensed for longer use then they your GP or clinic should either make you an in person appointment to have it replaced, or prescribe you something else such as the pill to make sure you remain protected.

Other forms of contraception which may be more easily accessible during lockdown are **Condoms and Internal Condoms (femidoms)**, which you can buy from supermarkets or order online via pharmacy websites or online stores such as Superdrug and Boots. If you cannot afford to buy condoms or are unable to get hold of them for any reason contact **Diverse via social media** or email us at **enquiries@dhiverse.org.uk** and we will post some to you, free of charge!

You may also want to consider using Diaphragms and Spermicide. Although initially you will need a prescription from your doctor to get a diaphragm, these can be reused for around 2 years and spermicide can be bought online or found in pharmacies and may be a cheaper alternative to buying condoms.

### ◆ **Emergency contraception**

If you need emergency contraception, don't delay seeking help. The sooner you access emergency contraception, the more likely it is to be effective. The type of emergency contraception you will need depends on how long it has been since you've had unprotected sex. Emergency contraception is free when prescribed by a GP or sexual health clinic. Some pharmacies can provide it for free but other pharmacies will charge. You are allowed to leave the house for emergency contraception, even during the lockdown. If you are unable to leave your house, speak to your GP or sexual health clinic on the phone who can give you further advice.

### ◆ **Support and Information:**

**iCaSH:** <https://www.icash.nhs.uk/> or 0300 300 3030

**DHIVERSE:** Sexual Health Support, Advice, Education, Training and Enquiries <https://www.dhiverse.org.uk/> or 01223 508805 or [enquiries@dhiverse.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@dhiverse.org.uk)

**NHS:** <https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/sexual-health/>

**FPA:** <https://www.sexwise.fpa.org.uk/> or 0300 123 7123

**Brook:** Sexual Health for Young People <https://www.brook.org.uk/>

**THT:** <https://www.tht.org.uk/>

**Free STI Testing Services:** <https://www.freetest.me/>

**LGBT Foundation:** <https://lgbt.foundation/sexualhealth>

**BHIVA:** <https://www.bhiva.org/Coronavirus-COVID-19>

**BASHH:** <https://www.bashh.org/>

**FSRH:** Advice for Women - <https://www.fsrh.org/documents/advice-for-women-seeking-contraception-abortion-and-other/>