

Looking after your sexual health





The importance of sexual health

Your sexual health is an important part of your wellbeing. Good sexual health means being able to make informed choices about sex and relationships. It is about knowledge:

- knowing your body and having access to reliable information about relationships and sex;
- knowing how to prevent things like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy;
- knowing how to access sexual healthcare;
- knowing about contraception and where to get it;
- knowing how to access tests if you need them.



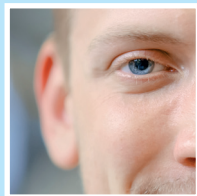
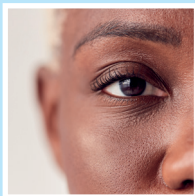


Looking after your sexual health

Sexual relationships should be enjoyable, pleasurable and safe; free from coercion, discrimination and violence.

A healthy relationship also needs trust and good communication. It is important to talk with your partner about sex to ensure you have each other's consent. If you're unsure about having sex, it is always OK to say 'no'. Even if you consent to a sexual act, you can change your mind at any time. Take control of your sexual health by:

- knowing your own body, knowing what you are comfortable with and talking to your sexual partner;
- using a condom to protect against STIs;



- limiting your number of sexual partners;
- knowing about STIs and getting tested;
- using contraception to prevent unplanned pregnancy;
- ensuring you are up to date with your HPV vaccination;
- attending for cervical screening when invited.





Contraception – choose what works best for you

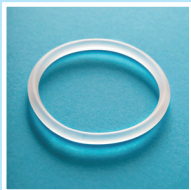
There are lots of different types of contraception and different things work for different people. Some forms of contraception have added benefits as well as preventing pregnancy, for example, some help with irregular or heavy periods.

Find out more at www.sexualhealthni.info/contraception

In Northern Ireland contraception is free and available from your GP, online, Sexual and Reproductive Health services and Common Youth, a service for young people aged under 25. These services provide advice if you're not sure which form of contraception would be best for you.

Find details of your local Sexual and Reproductive Health service at www.sexualhealthni.info/contraception/where-to-get-contraception

Online contraception is available from **SH:24**. This is a free service with a key role in contraception provision, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is quick, discreet and completely confidential. To access this service, visit <https://sh24.org.uk/contraception>





Emergency contraception

Sometimes things go wrong with contraception, for instance, you or your partner may forget to take a contraceptive pill or a condom breaks. If this happens, women can use 'emergency contraception' to reduce the chances of getting pregnant.

The most effective type of emergency contraception is a contraceptive coil, sometimes called 'the copper coil'. It is a small device which is placed in the womb. This can be done in all Sexual and Reproductive Health services.

Another type of emergency contraception is emergency hormonal contraception, also known as the 'morning after pill'. This is available for free in most community pharmacies, from your GP or your local Sexual and Reproductive Health service.



Through the Pharmacy First service, community pharmacies can provide free emergency hormonal contraception (morning after pill) to women and young people aged 13 years or over. This can be used up to 120 hours (5 days) after having unprotected sex. The service is confidential and discreet. Find out how to get emergency contraception in your area at

www.sexualhealthni.info/contraception/methods/emergency-contraception



Planning a pregnancy

A planned pregnancy gives the mother the opportunity to improve her own and her baby's health by, for example, catching up on vaccinations, stopping smoking and taking vitamin D and folic acid. You can find out more about preparing for pregnancy at www.nidirect.gov.uk/pregnancy-planning

Contraception has an important role in allowing time between pregnancies which is healthier for women and babies. A woman can get pregnant as soon as one month after birth, so what contraception to use after pregnancy should be decided before the baby is born.

If you have been trying to get pregnant for some time and have concerns, arrange an appointment with your GP. They will carry out an initial assessment and help you decide if referral to the Regional Fertility Centre is appropriate. For more, visit www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/services/rfc



A decorative graphic on the left side of the page consists of a vertical stack of ten arrows of different colors (red, orange, green, blue, purple, pink, red, orange, yellow, green, dark green, blue) pointing to the right.

Unplanned pregnancy

Pregnancies aren't always planned, in fact, around half of pregnancies are unplanned. A woman with an unexpected pregnancy has choices. She can continue with the pregnancy and access healthcare just as with a planned pregnancy or she can choose to end the pregnancy.

Some women will be certain about their decision while others may need more support. Pregnancy Choices counselling is available from Informing Choices NI. Go to www.informingchoicesni.org/counselling

Information is also available on abortion services in Northern Ireland at www.nidirect.gov.uk/abortion-services

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

STIs are infections that spread during sex and sexual contact.

There has been a rise in STI diagnoses in Northern Ireland in recent years. Symptoms include:

- change in vaginal discharge;
- discharge from the penis;
- pain passing urine.

But often there are no symptoms. Testing is important if you have a new partner or have had unprotected sex. Some STIs, if left untreated, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, ectopic pregnancy or infertility.

It is free to get tested and excellent treatments are available.

Find out more about STIs at

www.sexualhealthni.info/stis/types-of-stis





STI testing

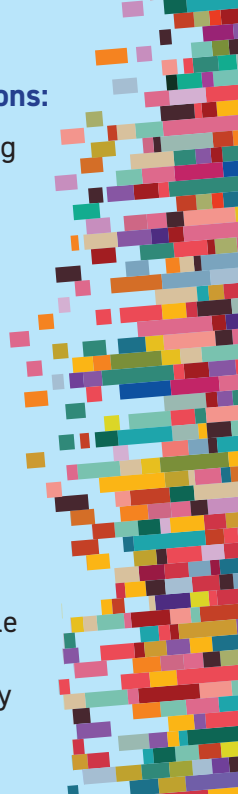
Sexual health or Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinics offer free STI testing and treatment. If you have no symptoms you can get a free online test kit from SH:24. To order go to www.sh24.org.uk/orders/sti-test-kit. If you are aged under 25 years you can also go to www.commonyouth.com/clinical-support-services

If you do have symptoms or are under 16 years of age you can get tested at your local GUM clinic. You can find details of your local GUM clinic at www.sexualhealthni.info/stis/gettingtested
If preferred, you can see your GP.

Don't delay getting tested as most STIs can be easily treated.

Advice and support can be found at the following organisations:

- **Common Youth:** free confidential sexual health and wellbeing services for under 25s www.commonyouth.com
- **Positive Life:** for people living with and affected by HIV www.positivelifeni.com
- **Informing Choices NI:** advice on sexual and reproductive health www.informingchoicesni.org
- **The Rainbow Project:** promoting the health and wellbeing for the LGBTQI+ community www.rainbow-project.org
- **Cara-Friend:** support and training for the LGBTQI+ community www.cara-friend.org.uk
- **LGBTQI+ Switchboard NI:** 0808 800 0390
- **HERE NI:** support for lesbian and bisexual women in Northern Ireland www.hereni.org
- **Transgender NI:** support for trans and gender diverse people www.transgenderni.org.uk
- **Mermaids NI:** supporting families of transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people www.mermaidsuk.org.uk





Everyone has the right to information and services that will enable them to be sexually responsible and healthy. The Public Health Agency's new website www.sexualhealthni.info offers a wealth of information, advice and resources on how to look after your sexual health.



Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

Find us on:



08/24