



## Tip Sheet for Safer Sex During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) cares about you and wants to help you stay healthy during the coronavirus pandemic. Sex is a normal part of life for many people, and it also qualifies as “close contact” that could put you and your partner at risk of getting and spreading COVID-19.

### Why is this guidance being updated?

This guidance update includes updating the definition of close contact, mentioning new variants of COVID-19, and also includes a link and more emphasis on the risks of indoor activities, particularly with poor ventilation.

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to impact our lives, our loves, and our communities for the foreseeable future.

Our goal in this updated guidance is to:

- provide new information about how sex may spread COVID-19,
- offer some consent-driven ideas around safer sex and harm reduction during COVID-19, and
- set a sex-positive, harm-reduction-oriented, care-focused tone.

Having safer sex during the COVID-19 pandemic is not only about protecting yourself – it’s also about protecting others and our community. To keep you and your partners as safe as possible, the San Francisco Department of Public Health recommends avoiding close contact– including sex – with anyone outside your household or a small, stable social group. Our commitment is to provide you with current information to help you reduce your risk of becoming infected with or spreading SARS-CoV-2, also known as the COVID-19 virus, particularly as we learn more about new variants of the virus.

This tip sheet gives you information and resources for safer sex during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will cover:

- What we know now about how sex can spread COVID-19
- Some ways you may be able to reduce your risk
- Some ways to navigate the challenges of sex during the COVID-19 pandemic

### COVID AND SEX: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

**Breathing, panting, shouts and groans, mouths, lips, eyes, and spit  
are all ways that COVID-19 can spread**

The science on COVID-19 is always evolving, so this information may be updated in the future. Let’s go over what we know now.

- **Looking good.** Just like with other diseases, you can’t tell what’s up just by looking at someone, no matter how fine they look. People who feel fine can still spread COVID-19. They may never have symptoms, or they may be spreading the virus and get symptoms in a couple more days. Even if you or your partner(s) don’t feel sick or have mild symptoms, you may unintentionally transmit the virus to others.
- **Navigating the landscape of love.** We know that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is in our spit and snot and exhalations. So where *else* do we find the virus and its receptors? Even though there have been no direct studies of sexual transmission of COVID-19 to date, evidence of the virus and its receptors has been found in parts of the



body involved in having sex.

- COVID-19 genetic material (RNA) has been found in semen in some studies, but not in others, and intact SARS-CoV-2 virus has been found in the feces of people who are infected with the virus.
  - COVID-19 genetic material (RNA) has been found in saliva and the throat.
  - Receptors for COVID-19 have been found in the lower gastrointestinal tract, including the rectum, and in the upper airway, including the throat.
  - COVID-19 **has not** yet been found in vaginal fluid.
- **Hot and heavy breathing.** COVID-19 is spread when we breathe out and is especially spread when a person coughs, sneezes, and even when they sing. Increased breathing, like with panting, groaning, moaning or shouting, increases what we exhale, and also is believed to increase the risk of spreading COVID-19.
  - **Maybe you'd like to watch.** The virus can spread to people who are within 6 feet of a person with COVID-19. The virus collects and concentrates indoors, so 6 feet may not be enough distance, particularly in a poorly-ventilated indoor location. Keeping your distance is an important way to reduce risk. Learn more at [www.sfdcp.org/indoorrisk](http://www.sfdcp.org/indoorrisk).
  - **Quicker can be better.** The longer we are within 6 feet of someone, the greater the risk of spreading COVID-19. All sex qualifies as close contact. And it's important to know that if you are just sitting near or standing **within 6 feet of someone with COVID-19 for 15 minutes altogether over 24 hours**, that also means you have had a high-risk exposure and would count as a "close contact." Both time and distance are important factors.
  - **Out of the closet.** Another increased risk for COVID-19 is being indoors in a small space for a prolonged time with someone who is infected. When it comes to COVID-19 risk, outdoors is MUCH better than indoors, and large, well-ventilated spaces are better than enclosed, small, poorly ventilated ones. Whether for mental health, or to reduce the risk of COVID-19, San Francisco DPH strongly believes that closets are bad for humans.
  - **No one should be forced out.** Deciding to go virtual for sex is one way to feel safe from COVID-19. But sometimes the walls in your house are thin, or that annoying roommate might walk in while you're online. Also, remember: what you do on-line (sexting, video clips) may be hard to erase after you are done: how well do you know and trust the person you are sharing information with? If you are not out yet, or are questioning, or haven't transitioned yet to those who live with you, or sexual encounters are not openly discussed in your household, be sure to focus on your emotional safety and see if there are ways to improve or secure your privacy.
  - **More people, more risk.** Some guidelines and sexual health experts have suggested finding a "sex buddy" as a way of reducing the risk of getting COVID-19. The fewer people we are exposed to, the lower the risk. Just like we have all learned with sexually transmitted infections, you share the risk of the person you are close to and of all the people that person was close to. Keeping your partners to a small, stable group could reduce your risk.
  - **Embrace dirty thoughts. And clean surfaces.** Current evidence suggests that COVID-19 may remain viable, meaning able to infect people, for hours to days on objects, including



those made from a variety of materials. People can also get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes, although this is thought to be a less common cause of getting COVID-19 than from breathing virus particles. Because sex often means touching the damp, sensitive, mucous-membrane parts of ourselves, the cleaning of surfaces, followed by disinfection, is a best practice measure for prevention.

- Cleaning sex toys, sheets, rings, masks, collars and other items is important. The **timing** of wiping down and cleaning objects is important, too. Be sure to clean them after they touch one body and before they touch another. Wash hands often with soap and water (regular soap is fine!) and avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth after touching any shared object.
- Alcohol-based sanitizer is effective at killing the virus that causes COVID-19 but if you use alcohol-based disinfectants on sex toys you want to **wash the toys afterward with soap and water too**, or – *ouch!* - disinfectants can cause stinging and inflammation and should not come into contact with tender genitals!  
[Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Home](#) (CDC, 4/2/2020)
- **Suck it - or not?** The virus can also spread through direct contact with saliva or mucus. Which means through licking, tasting, rubbing lips or eyes or face together, or on mouthed or spit-covered toys, or even through letting someone suck on your fingers and then putting them in your own mouth, just to name a few G-rated examples.

**Remember, we still have a lot to learn about COVID-19 and sex.**

### RISK REDUCTION: SEXUAL HEALTH IS HEALTH

It's important to remember that risk is a spectrum for most people. The safest way to avoid COVID-19 – especially for people who are vulnerable to getting seriously ill from it or who have regular contact with someone who is vulnerable ([www.sfcdcp.org/vulnerable](http://www.sfcdcp.org/vulnerable)) – is to avoid close contact with anyone outside your household. That includes sex. If you do have close contact outside your household, including sex, try to keep all contact to a small, stable social group.

It is very important to remember that your risk for COVID-19 is **also** determined by actions you take in **all** areas of your life. Your risk is also affected by the risks that your partner(s) may take in the non-sexual parts of their lives, too. Talking to your partners and potential partners about how they manage COVID-19 risk in other parts of their lives is important.

When thinking about how to have safer sex and reduce the risk of COVID-19, think about the same risk factors you do in non-sexual areas of life for COVID-19:

#### **distance, breath, time, people, and touch**

Whether you are having sex or not, think about the steps you can take to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission: stay at least 6 feet apart from others outside your household, if you are within 6 feet of others keep it as short as possible (i.e., less than 15 minutes), outdoors is MUCH better than indoors, fewer people is better, keep windows open and air flowing, face coverings for all, wash hands often, clean any shared objects, and avoid touching mouth, face, eyes or nose.



Here is a range of lower-risk to higher-risk approaches to safer sex. **Wearing a well-fitting mask that covers the mouth and nose** while having sex with other people will further reduce the risk:

Lower



Higher

- Virtual sex, masturbation, sex talk, porn while alone or with someone in your household
- Sex with household members only, indoors or out
- Sex with a small, stable group of partners outdoors, or indoors with windows open and increased ventilation, touched surfaces and shared objects are wiped down
- Sex with a small stable group of partners indoors with little or no ventilation, all shared objects and shared touched surfaces are wiped down
- Sex with more people, less distance, more time indoors with small and/or poorly ventilated spaces, close sharing of breath, lips, mouth, eyes, unprotected anal play, and all objects shared without wiping down

**Getting in the mindset.** The challenge of safer sex and COVID-19 is making changes work for you and your sex life. A big part of figuring that out is learning what you want to get out of sex. Is it about getting off? Is it the touch? Is it the need for intimacy and emotional connection? Is it all of those things? Staying safe with COVID-19 may mean learning more about yourself, what you need most out of sex, and how to communicate your needs and fears with current and potential partners.

**People are not positive or negative. Tests are.** We know from other pandemics that it is important not to stigmatize people who are infected, or who test positive. And to remember that we are often doing our best under difficult circumstances to keep ourselves and others as safe as we can. When it comes to COVID-19, we are all in this together.

**Touching and tracing.** If you or your partner tests positive, a COVID-19 team member from SF DPH will reach out to you to see how you're doing, and to talk with you about your close contacts and make sure you have the services you need. It is important to remember everyone you have been in close contact with starting 48 hours before symptoms began for the Contact Tracing team. These staff are public health professionals who are trained to keep your information private. They will never ask about financial information, for your social security number, or about your immigration status.

**Testing. Testing. One. Two. Three.** Should you just get a COVID test every so often – just because why not? In many areas of sexual health, like with HIV and syphilis, doctors and public health groups sometimes recommend regular testing, even if you don't have symptoms. With COVID-19, the people currently advised to get regular, asymptomatic tests are staff who work in high risk healthcare settings like hospitals and skilled nursing homes. However, if your work, like sex work, regularly exposes you to the general population, you are in a priority group for COVID-19 testing in San Francisco. Talk to your health care provider or visit [SF.gov/GetTestedSF](https://sf.gov/GetTestedSF) for more COVID-19 testing information.

**Negotiating your way – changes mid-stream.** Negotiating around sex and desire is a lifelong skill for most people. One way to stay safer is to plan ahead for moments when you might begin to feel unsafe, maybe because your partner's actions change. Do you think you can stop the moment and discuss? What words might feel right for you to use? Planning for those moments in advance can help you navigate them better.

**Timing – the slow burn.** Consider being slower and more intentional than usual when taking next steps



in terms of safer sex and COVID-19. Taking things slower may be more important as we learn about the impact of new variants of the virus, and their impact on our community. We know that COVID-19 can take up to about 14 days to infect someone. Most cases of COVID-19 are spread by people who have no symptoms. For those who develop symptoms, people can become sicker and sicker for 1-2 weeks after symptoms manifest. So, when it comes to sex, you may want to consider making changes only every four weeks. For example, you might change or add a new or different partner only once every four weeks. Or you might try moving from mutual masturbation to something physically closer over four weeks, as you learn more about your partner(s) and the risks in other parts of their lives.

### MORE GREAT TIPS ON SAFER SEX

Want to learn more specific tips on how to have safer sex during COVID-19? Visit <https://www.sfcityclinic.org/covid-19-faq>

#### **For HIV/STD Testing Visit**

<https://www.sfcityclinic.org>

#### **Due to the COVID-19 response, San Francisco City Clinic can only see patients who:**

- Have symptoms of a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- Have a partner with an STD
- Have been contacted by an SF City Clinic staff person and asked to come in
- Are requesting HIV post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) or pre-exposure prophylaxis
- Are in our PrEP program and need STI/HIV testing and medication refills
- Are HIV-positive and not on medication, and would like help getting into care, or
- Need contraception

#### **PLEASE CALL CITY CLINIC AT:**

**(415) 487-5500 BEFORE you come in so we can determine how best to assist you.**

For instance, we may be able to give you advice over the phone or call in a prescription for you.

If you are not having symptoms and would like HIV or STI testing, and you are a San Francisco resident, you can order a home test kit from: <https://takemehome.org/>

**SF City Clinic** is not able to test patients for COVID-19. If you are experiencing respiratory symptoms like cough, fever, or shortness of breath, and are concerned about COVID-19, please contact your primary care provider or visit [sf.gov/citytests](https://sf.gov/citytests) for more information. **#TakeCareofYourself #GoodSex**

**#YouMatter**



## RESOURCES

Stay informed. Information is changing rapidly. Useful resources can be found at:

- San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFPDH)
  - <https://www.sfdcp.org/covid19>
- California Department of Public Health (CDPH)
  - <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/ncov2019.aspx>
- San Francisco Department of Health and Getting to Zero San Francisco
  - [HIV Prevention and Care Options](#)
- SF City Clinic Referrals and Local Resources
  - <https://www.sfcityclinic.org/patient-education-resources/referralslocalresources>
- SF City Clinic FAQ
  - <https://www.sfcityclinic.org/covid-19-faq>
- St. James Infirmary: Peer-based occupational health and safety clinic for sex workers of all genders
  - <https://stjamesinfirmary.org/>
- Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention: HIV Risk and Prevention – PrEP
  - <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/risk/prep/index.html>
- San Francisco Health Network: Assistance with mental health and substance abuse
  - <https://sfhealthnetwork.org/about-sfhn/mental-health-crisis/>
- Annals of Internal Medicine, Sexual Health in the SARS-CoV-2 Era, May 2020
  - <https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M20-2004>
- British Medical Journal, COVID-19 restrictions and changing sexual behaviours in HIV-negative MSM at high risk of HIV infection in London, UK, January 2021
  - <https://sti.bmj.com/content/early/2021/01/17/sextrans-2020-054768>