

How To Navigate 6 Common Sexual Health Conversations With Your Partner

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The pillar of any good relationship is open communication — and that doesn't stop at being honest about whose turn it is to do the dishes. Opening up about sex with your partner, whether it's about your birth control options, the positions that make you feel best, or the need to take emergency contraception, is essential to truly enjoying your sex life.

That's why, in partnership with Plan B One-Step, we created a handy guide to the most common sex conversations you might encounter, tapping Katharine O'Connell White, MD, MPH, and Rachel Needle, PsyD, for their best advice on how to navigate each. No matter if it's a new Hinge fling, a veteran booty call, or a long-term relationship, you should feel empowered to have these conversations — especially when they help ensure safe sexual health practices and more enjoyment to help you reach that O. Read ahead to see how Dr. White and Dr. Needle break it all down. A better sex life awaits you.

The Birth Control Conversation

Before you engage in sex at all, it's crucial that you and your partner are transparent with each other about what contraception you plan to use to protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and unintended pregnancies. This means talking about the methods you might already be using, like the pill or the IUD, plus barrier methods like condoms or a diaphragm. Be open and honest about your prior experience so that you're both on the same page.

"The condom discussion is paramount, for the safety of all involved," Dr. White says, and she suggests always having a supply of condoms on hand. This way, both parties can feel more comfortable going into sex knowing that you're taking precautions to reduce the risk of STIs and STDs.

The Frequency Conversation

While you may feel like you're the only couple that struggles with differing opinions on how often you want to have sex, the truth is that it's very common. The key here is to bring up your feelings about frequency when you're not hot and heavy. "Start off with something positive about your relationship, including your sexual relationship," Dr. Needle advises. Then, "use

feeling words and 'I' statements, [so you don't put] your partner on the defensive." Use the conversation to establish the factors that are contributing to either party's decrease in sexual desire, and make plans to work on them, either on your own, together, or with a professional. Just remember: "There is not really a 'normal' amount or an amount of sex that is good or correct to have. Each couple is different."

The Emergency Contraception Conversation

So the condom broke during sex, or it never got used. There's no need to skirt around the issue. Dr. White suggests bringing up the emergency contraception conversation by saying something like, "Whoops, I think we forgot something," if you and your partner forgot to use your preferred birth control method. If it broke, just say so, point blank. It's likely that your partner is thinking the exact same thing as you are — someone just needs to break the ice and bring it up.

Make arrangements to buy Plan B One-Step for emergency contraception together, or, in the case of a fleeting one-night stand or a FWB-gone-awry, the conversation might not be necessary, and you should still feel empowered to get your emergency contraceptive on your own. It's easier than ever, with Plan B available on the shelf at all major retailers without a prescription, age restriction, or ID. Just keep in mind: You have 72 hours after unprotected sex to take it, and the sooner you take it, the more effective it will be at helping prevent pregnancy.

The Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) & Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) Conversation

When it comes to asking your partner to get tested, Dr. White advises keeping the convo friendly and factual. Try telling them your plans to get tested, and suggest they do the same. "That way, getting tested is a joint venture and not a one-way request," she explains. If you already have an STI or STD, it's important to chat about this prior to any sexual encounters — your partner has a right to know about their own risks. "Pick the right time and place for a serious conversation, and try [saying something like], 'I like you a lot, so there's something you need to know.'"

The Period Sex Conversation

Period sex isn't for everyone. But for some, it can be just as enjoyable as non-period sex and even bring couples together in a new way. According to Dr. White, the best way to approach this topic is with a casual conversation that signals you're not embarrassed and allows your partner to follow your lead. "Mention [upfront] that you're on your period, so [you can] throw down a towel on the bed to protect the sheets," she says — especially those white cotton sheets. Not only is this conversation important to have for transparency, but it could introduce a favorite new time of the month to get intimate. "Sex during your period has a lot of

advantages," she adds. "The blood can act as a [secondary] lubricant, and the endorphins released with orgasm can help soothe period cramps."

The Painful-Sex Conversation

Plain and simple, painful sex isn't good sex for anyone. "Any decent human will not want to cause you pain and will work with you to make it more comfortable," Dr. White says. So use your voice to tell your partner immediately if something isn't feeling quite right — even if this means stopping sex early. If the pain persists, "Trust your body... You should not keep doing the same thing that hurts. This will only teach your body to associate pain with sex, which can be a brutal cycle to break," she adds.