

FACT SHEET



RURAL CENTER for AIDS/STD PREVENTION

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Condom Breakage: Possible Causes and Avoidance

Introduction

Consistent and correct use of the male, latex condom remains the single best strategy to prevent the transmission and acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).^{1,2} Like any health protective device, however, condoms may be less effective when used incorrectly. One unfortunate and too common example of this problem is condoms breaking during penetrative penile-vaginal or penile-anal intercourse. Indeed, the event of “condom breakage” may be relatively frequent. For example:

- A study of 278 young men attending a publicly funded STD clinic found that men reported breakage during 125 of 834 occasions of penile-vaginal intercourse. The breakage rate was therefore 15.0%. Eighty-seven men (31.3%) reported breakage during at least one of the last 3 occasions of penile-vaginal intercourse.³
- A study of 1,124 patients (15 to 44 years of age) of an STD clinic, found that 40.7% of 548 males and 31.4% of 576 females reported at least one occurrence of condom breakage in the past 30 days.⁴
- A study of 158 male college students found that 29% experienced at least one event of condom breakage in the past 3 months.⁵ A similar study found that differences in breakage rates did not significantly differ between college males and college females.⁶
- In another study of STD clinic attendees, breakage (in the past 4 months) was reported by 212 of 626 (33.9%) women having sex with men, 306 of 978 (31.2%) men having sex with women, and 64 of 369 (17.3%) men having sex with men.⁷

Possible Causes of Condom Breakage

Fortunately, recent studies have provided multiple insights into the condom use errors that may culminate in condom breakage.^{3,8-11} For example, a relatively frequent cause of condom breakage may occur when either sex partner allows teeth, jewelry, fingernails, or otherwise sharp objects to contact the condom before or during use. Another common cause may be the undue friction that occurs when condoms are not pre-lubricated or become dry during sexual intercourse. Some people do add lubricants to condoms to avoid dryness; however, oil-

based lubricants are often used and these will quickly deteriorate the latex material thereby causing breakage. Breakage may also occur when condoms are too small in relation to penis size or when air is not expelled from the receptacle tip during condom application. Some highlights of these studies are:

- A recent study of men attending an STD clinic found that those reporting condoms had contacted sharp objects were about 2.6 times more likely to experience breakage compared to men who indicated condoms had not contacted sharp objects.³ A study of college men and women found the same association except the value was about three times more likely.⁸
- Evidence from a study of young African American men attending an STD clinic suggests that couples may rarely interrupt sexual intercourse to add lubricants to condoms.¹¹ Other studies have found that as many as 19% of the sample had recently used condoms without lubrication.^{5,6,12}
- In yet another study of college students, gender and minority status were not associated with condom breakage, but age was. Younger students were more likely to report breakage than older students. In that same study, use of an oil-based lubricant was also associated with more breakage as were problems with the “fit and feel” of condoms. Indeed, compared to their counterparts who did not indicate these discomfort problems, students reporting discomfort were about 3.6 times more likely to also report breakage.¹²
- An Australian study found that condom breakage was more common among people having multiple sex partners.¹³ A similar study in the United States found that both condom breakage and condom slippage were more common events among people reporting sex with more than one partner in the past three months.⁸ The reason for this association is unknown but it may be that the proper procedures of correct condom use take time to establish within any given sexual relationship.
- A study of men and women attending clinics in three international sites found that people who experienced condom slippage were more likely to

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also experience condom breakage.¹⁰ This has also been observed in the US.³ Again, the reason for the observed association is not known; however, it may be that slippage and breakage are a “double” consequence of ill-fitting condoms.

Strategies to Avoid Condom Breakage

Perhaps the single best strategy to help people avoid breakage is to ensure that they have awareness of and access to a broad range of choices in condom types and sizes. In clinic settings, for example, one recommendation is to provide clients with a various brands and sizes to help them find the one size and brand that works best for them.¹¹ Clinic-based instruction in the correct selection and use of condoms may also be beneficial relative to avoiding breakage.^{14,15}

In general, people at risk of STD acquisition or transmission, as well as those relying on condoms to prevent conception, may benefit from brief instruction (perhaps augmented by a handout) that encourages the following behaviors:

- Take great caution when opening condom packages – never use scissors or a knife; instead, use only fingers.
- When applying the condom, and after it is on the penis, take great caution not to let sharp fingernails, teeth, or jewelry contact the condom.
- Be sure that condoms fit snugly without being uncomfortably tight. They should always be unrolled only after the top of the condom has been placed on the head of the penis.
- Most condoms have a receptacle tip—this is designed to “catch” the ejaculate (cum). The tip should be free of air and left “loose”; that is, it should not be pulled onto the head of the penis.
- Be sure that condoms are adequately lubricated before use and that lubrication is added periodically once sex has begun. Pocket sized containers of water-based lubricants are easily available and provide ample amounts for continued lubrication even when sexual intercourse lasts a long time.

For persons practicing risky sexual behavior, the use of the male condom can reduce the risk of STD and HIV transmission and acquisition. However, to achieve the greatest protection from condom use, they must not only be used consistently but also correctly. Incorrect use may result in condom breakage and slippage, thus reducing their protective effect.

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