



UNDRESSING DISABILITY

enhance the uk

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Sex Toy Safety

There are a lot of considerations that go into buying a new sex toy that goes far beyond size, shape, speed and if your partner likes it.

For example, did you know the material it's made from or the lubricant that you use with it can make a difference?

Here is our complete guide to everything you need to consider while shopping for a safe sex toys.

Body safe toys

Sadly, not all sex toys are created equally as some can be made from materials which are not body safe. This means we need to shop carefully and examine the materials that our toys are made from. It's important to note that price is not always an indicator of quality either.

Materials

Phthalates

One of the materials to avoid is a group of chemicals that make plastic more durable and softer when combined. Phthalates have been linked to endocrine disruption, reproductive toxicity and cancer.

Worryingly, phthalates are used in everything from vinyl flooring to cosmetics to nail varnish including some sex toys. However, it's not all bad news as sex toy companies are becoming aware of this and are now manufacturing toys free from phthalates.

Being safe and product-aware while shopping doesn't always mean a 'phthalate-free' sticker is applied to a toy. The chemicals that fall under the group have long and complicated names: diisononyl phthalate (DINP), diisodecyl phthalate (DIDP) and dipropylheptyl phthalate (DPHP) are just six of the most common.

Reputable websites

There may be other harmful materials lurking in sex toys that are labelled "phthalate-free" or "paraben-free." A reputable website will be completely transparent about what their toys are made from or happy to answer any questions you might have. If you are not sure, don't take the risk.

Nanoplastics and fibres

Some plastics break down leaving small fibres behind them. Scarily, this may happen inside the body with less durable materials. While we have heard of micro-plastics thanks to a public ban on their use in cosmetics, we may not have heard of nano-plastics which are even smaller at just 100 nanometers across or less. Nanoparticles may seep through the skin barrier into the bloodstream carrying things like phthalates.

A new study from 2023 tested four sex toys: an anal toy, anal beads, an external vibrator and a dual vibrator. The research found that all released microplastics and nano-plastics from abrasion with small fragments of the toy coming off due to friction in use. All the toys they tested had phthalates present including some that were listed as free from. The anal toy displayed the highest abrasion rate followed by the beads, then the dual vibrator, and then the external vibrator.

(LINK – The Study: <https://microplastics.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s43591-023-00054-6>)

The Law

While some chemicals are banned or restricted, it's worth noting where you buy your toys from.

Some chemicals may be banned by Europe but allowed in the United States. The lists of banned chemicals are constantly updated and there are petitions and consumer activist movements to increase government action on chemical bans. If in doubt, leave the toy out!

Porous material

There are some materials that can be porous or slightly porous which means bacteria can seep into the toy. This can make it difficult to ensure that they are completely clean. Sponge, wood and rubber are examples of porous materials while glass, marble and ABS plastics are not. Even if the toys you use are non-porous, they still need a really good wash and condoms if they are going to be used with multiple partners. Non-porous toys may also be water resistant, but it is important to check with the individual toy to see what it suggests as waterproof and resistant are very different!

Silicone

Medical-grade silicone is now a preferred material for sex toys to be made from. There is a reason for this as they are softer than plastic and easily cleaned.

Check that the silicone listed on the packaging is 'medical grade' instead of anything else. Some thermoplastics such as TPR or TPE or PVC can sometimes be referred to as just silicone on the packaging. TPR for example is hypo-allergenic, non-toxic and phthalate-free but it is more porous than silicone, so it is suggested that condoms are used with it to avoid bacteria.

ABS Plastic

ABS plastic is a favourite with sex toy designers because it's non-toxic and safe to use in different ways. The material is also extremely durable as it doesn't break down over time nor does it release any harmful chemicals.

Interestingly, it can break down with UV light exposure over time so another reason to keep your toys hidden from the windows when not in use. ABS Plastic is thought to have an approximately 50-year life span although it is unclear if this applies to sex toys. It is also a form of hard plastic that is chemically inert. This means it doesn't react to other chemicals and is safe to be paired with lubricants while being non-toxic and non-absorbent.

Nickel

We tend not to think about the metal mechanics of our toys but it's likely that your favourite vibrator has some hardware you need to consider. Stainless steel is durable, easily cleaned and can adapt to temperature changes.

However, while it is hypoallergenic, if someone has an acute nickel sensitivity, they may react as stainless steel may contain some nickel. It's generally considered hypoallergenic for most people. Nickel gives stainless steel a shiny finish so if your toys have a matte sheen then it may not have a lot of nickel.

Allergies

Allergies to sex toys are rare despite toys being of different materials. Latex or lubricants may be a factor here. Switching to latex-free toys, condoms or swapping to a different lube may help.

Glass

Glass is generally a safe sex toy as it can be cleaned easily although you will need to watch the temperatures that you reach while sanitising. It will also need to be disposed of if chipped, cracked or broken as it can lead to cuts.

Glass sex toys are more commonly made from borosilicate glass due to advantages such as durability, chemical resistance, and thermal stability. Glass toys by nature are more brittle than others so you will need to be careful how you store, clean and handle them!

Charging points

Another reason for shopping through reputable sites is that you are buying an electrical item that should need to be charged.

Consider the toy shape

While shape and size are down to personal preference, there are some things that you will need to think about. If you are using anal toys, they will need to have a flared base to avoid them slipping inside the body.

Quest toys

We've been really proud to develop our range with leading sex toy designer, Rocks Off. As part of our Quest, we were determined that we should only use the best, body-safe materials. So, you can be assured that toys from the range are manufactured in-house, use ABS plastic and are phthalate-free, allergy-free and non-porous.

The toys are also tested in-house to ensure they are durable, long-lasting and kind to your skin.

(LINK – The Quest Range: <https://rocks-off.com/collections/quest> _

Lube

It's important to note the material that your toys are made from so that you can find a good lubricant to match. Some lubes such as oil-based products are not suitable for silicone sex toys as they degrade the material breaking it down. This can cause splits, holes and fraying which allows bacteria to get into the product passing it to the user.

Matching silicone or latex products to the right lubricant doesn't have to be difficult as you just need to make sure they are waterproof. Not only that but be careful what ingredients the water base contains as CBD for example is not water soluble. It needs to state that it is safe to be used with condoms or sex toys.

Bacteria

Unclean toys

It should go without saying that we all clean our sex toys regularly and every time after a new partner. Passing sex toys from person to person without cleaning them can leave you open to transmitting infections. You can use condoms over sex toys but will still need to give them a clean after use.

Toys that are just for personal not partner use can still breed bacteria and germs. Sex toys can introduce bacteria into the vagina causing things like yeast infections or thrush.

Symptoms of a yeast infection can include itching, burning or discharge. It's important to avoid reusing the toy until your infection has passed otherwise you risk reinfection.

Second-hand toys

The reuse/recycle industry has boomed in recent years as we consumers have become more savvy about being sustainable. While this may make sense for clothing, it can be a bit of a grey area when it comes to second-hand sex toys.

There is a thriving sex toy swap community online although many reputable sites such as eBay have introduced strict regulations around who can and can't sell sex or swap toys online.

It's worth keeping in mind that even with the most serious of scrubs, some materials may not be fully sterilisable. This could mean you are risking bacteria, disease and potentially bodily fluids which might remain on the surface or in the crevices of the toys.

Even if it isn't a swap or sell situation, many couples may face the decision if they want to use old sex toys with new partners. Sex toys can be expensive so not everyone will want to replace a perfectly good toy, but this is a decision to be made together. Some partners may feel uncomfortable with using an old toy even if it has been sterilised.

Storing sex toys

While all of us are guilty of having a secret hiding place, there are things we need to do to ensure our toys stay clean and in good condition.

Dust bags

Bedside cabinet drawers may be the preferred spot for our toys as they are close to hand when we need them, but they can acquire a lot of junk. Popping a toy in a dust bag when you are finished is a great way to make sure it doesn't pick up any dust, grit or dirt while off-duty in a drawer.

Sunlight

Some toys can be damaged by heat and direct sunlight. This could overheat the appliance or cause the material to break down.

Moisture-free

Keeping toys in the bathroom may not be a good idea due to moisture. This can affect the motor of vibrators if they are consistently stored in damp environments and not allowed to dry completely. Also, be aware of anything leaking such as lubricants or massage oils in any drawers where toys are stored. It can also affect non-rechargeable batteries too.

Dry

As well as needing to be washed regularly, toys also need to be completely dry before they are placed back in their hiding places. This is to prevent the growth of bacteria or mould.

Cool down

Always allow your vibrator to cool down before you pop it back in its bag or box.

Store separately

We don't tend to think of chemicals when we think of sex toys, but different materials will be a combination of them. This could mean a reaction if they are stored with other chemicals so keep them separate.

Switch it off!

If you feel your vibrator become too warm, then switch it off and allow it to cool. Excessive use of the toy will wear out its motor causing it to overheat.

Leaky Batteries

If you feel that your toy has a leaky battery - dispose of it immediately and do not use it. Wash any body part that comes into contact with it and seek medical advice from a doctor.

How to clean your toys

So you've done the thing, bought the toy and shopped carefully....now what? Sex toys need to be cleaned regularly, especially after use with a new partner. But how?

There are several ways to wash and sterilise your toys, but it does depend on the material and if it is waterproof or resistant.

Knowing the difference between the two can mean you keep your vibrator in working condition for longer.

Toys should state if they are waterproof or water-resistant on the box or instructions. Water resistance will allow a smaller amount of water like a splash rather than a bath. Waterproof can mean that it is a complete barrier to water, but most toys may state a certain depth. Follow the instructions on each toy that you buy as individual toys will have their own specifications.

Three different types of cleaning

Basic cleaning which removes surface material

Disinfecting/ sanitising removes bacteria to make the toy hygienic. Disinfecting a toy regularly is a good idea but if you are using it with a new partner then it's necessary to pre and post-contact disinfect it. This is especially relevant if someone using the toy has had an infection or thrush.

Sterilizing which kills absolutely all bacteria and viruses

Handwashing

Gently hand wash the toy with warm water, a cloth and a mild soap. You will need to determine how waterproof a toy is and remove the batteries before a wash. Disinfecting and sanitising can mean a toy is free from any nasty bacteria that may linger after a quick wash.

Wet the vibrator and cloth with warm water before applying soap. Gently wash the toy with soap and cloth for 20 seconds before rinsing it under warm running water. Let it air dry or pat dry with a clean towel.

Boiling

A toy can be disinfected by boiling if it is 100% silicone, borosilicate glass or stainless steel. You will need to surface clean them first before popping them into a pot of boiling water for a few minutes.

Be extra careful with glass so put a towel down in the pot to avoid it jumping in the water and potentially chipping or cracking off the sides. Keep an eye on the toy while it is cleaning.

Do not remove the toy with your hands! You will need tongs to pick them up. Allow the toy to cool naturally instead of plunging it into cold water as this may cause it to crack.

Dishwashers

Incredibly, this can actually work to keep some toys clean, but you may not want to do this in a shared house! You can deep clean non-mechanized 100% silicone, stainless steel or borosilicate glass toys in the dishwasher. Just be careful not to use any soap or dishwasher tablets as they are far too harsh on the material.

The heat in a dishwasher will cause a problem for vibrator motors though so be careful not to wreck your new toy. The toy will also need to be waterproof too.

You should note that this isn't as effective as boiling your toys at killing bacteria so you may want to think about other ways to sanitise.

Chemicals and soaps

Avoid any harsh chemicals or fragranced soaps that may cause skin or toy reactions. This includes bleach, household cleaning products or anything exfoliant.

Toy cleaners and wipes

Many shops will also sell toy cleaners which are similar to soap and water but with an added sanitiser. Each cleanser will have instructions on how to use so follow the instructions. They can be a great option for travel as they are easily popped into a suitcase. However, they can be expensive, and many wipes are not environmentally friendly. Wipes are also surface cleaners not a deep clean so be prepared to have to do a deep clean before you next use the toy as they can leave behind fluids and bacteria.

Avoid any harsh chemicals or overly fragranced soaps as they may cause irritation. Allow the toys to air dry before popping them back in the drawer or box under the bed. You can also pat dry with a clean towel if you need to.

There are cleaning wipes and sprays that you can buy at sex shops but it's worth a chat with staff to make sure they are compatible with the product you have.



About us

'Undressing Disability' is a global campaign which aims to raise standards in sexual health and sexual awareness for disabled people. Issues around sexuality and sexual frustration are frequently raised by disabled people who feel that they have less opportunity and ability to explore their sexuality than others. Through a lack of understanding, education and a general lack of services, disabled people frequently cannot access the support that would make it possible for them to make the sorts of choices about their lifestyles that most of us take for granted. As part of our campaign we run the Love Lounge, an online forum providing free advice on all things sex, love and disability. We also have free downloadable resources. As a user-led charity, our aim is to change the way people view disability, which often involves removing the 'fear factor' that so often surrounds the subject. We support businesses to be more inclusive by providing disability awareness training, British Sign Language workshops and accessibility audits, amongst other things.

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#undressingdisability



**UNDRESSING
DISABILITY**

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CHANGING SOCIETY'S VIEWS ON DISABILITY