

Pregnancy-safe sex toy swaps

Are sex toys safe in pregnancy?

Got a lot on your mind (and not in a good way) when it comes to pregnancy sex? You're definitely not alone. According to one study published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 25% to 50% of pregnant people are worried about potentially hurting their baby while having sex.¹

Such concerns might have also made you contemplate taking a break from the pleasurable world of your erotic toy chest.

But Casey Tanner, certified sex therapist for The Expansive Group, United States, offers this note of reassurance:

“Generally, sex toys are safe to use while pregnant. As long as your medical provider hasn't advised you against any sexual activity, and you're experiencing a healthy pregnancy, there is no need to put that pleasure on hold.”

Still, it's natural to have questions about sex toy — and accessory — safety and how to use them comfortably when you've got a pregnancy bump. So we've rounded up the most common questions for our experts to alleviate those concerns and arm you with pregnancy-safe swaps you can make for added peace of mind.

Q: “I'm nervous about toys that go inside my vagina now that I'm pregnant. Are they safe?”

A: Here's the good news: Sex toys that enter the vagina are usually safe to use during pregnancy. “Toys that penetrate the vagina don't enter the cervix,” says Erica Smith, sex educator and owner of Erica Smith Education and Consulting, United States.

“Your baby is safe inside a protective sac in the uterus. So you can rest easy knowing that sexual penetration does not come near the baby.”

However, if using an external toy will ease your — or your partner's — mind, specific toys meant for external play like a wand vibrator could be a great alternative.

“Try placing the wand vibrator on your vulva, clitoris, nipples, or anywhere that may feel good,” suggests Smith.

During pregnancy, your body's blood volume can increase by as much as 45%,¹³ which in turn leads to increased blood flow, especially to sexual organs like the vulva.¹⁴

“With that often comes easier arousal,¹⁵ which means you might not need as intense stimulation as you did pre-pregnancy,” says Smith. “And since wand vibrators are powerful, you can try them on low settings first and through clothes or a sheet.”

Afterward, feel free to adjust the settings according to what feels great for you.

Q: “Now that I’m pregnant, I don’t feel as comfortable receiving oral sex. Any tips?”

A: For starters, there’s no medical reason why you can’t keep receiving oral sex during your pregnancy. However, we get it. For some people, body changes due to pregnancy, increased discharge, weight gain,⁵ or the development of stretch marks⁶ may lead to body confidence insecurities that weren’t there pre-pregnancy.

If you’re having partnered sex but don’t feel comfortable receiving oral sex while pregnant, a clitoral suction toy may be just what you’re looking for.

This toy uses air pressure to create a pulsing sensation that stimulates the clitoris, which can lead to more intense orgasms.¹⁶

Place the mouth of the toy directly over the clitoris to create a seal between the skin and the toy to achieve the intended effect. It’s perfect for partnered or solo sex.

Q: “Help! My nipples are too sensitive to use nipple clamps anymore.”

A: If a bit of clamp action is normally your thing, but you’re experiencing increased nipple sensitivity (which is a common occurrence as your breasts grow during pregnancy),⁷ that oh-so-pleasurable pain may not feel so great anymore.

In this case, adjustable nipple clamps could work great, providing that nipple stimulation you desire while letting you play with the pressure. Some work by loosening or tightening the screws at the bottom of the clamps. While for others, you slide a small bar up or down to adjust them.

Or hey, take it back to basics, using your fingers to provide a gentler squeezing or twisting sensation on the nipples that you can ramp up or down precisely as much as you like.

However, make sure to discuss the use of nipple stimulation with your medical provider, and avoid it if you’ve been advised to avoid sexual activity or have a high-risk pregnancy.

Q: “Can I use any lube during pregnancy? Is there anything I should be looking out for/avoiding?”

A: Lube can be a smart addition to your pregnancy sex kit. In addition to increasing pleasure (especially if you’ve noticed changes in your natural lubrication), this sex staple can also decrease the risk of friction-induced microtears in the skin, which can lead to increased infections.¹⁷

During pregnancy, it's best to avoid lubes and other personal care products that contain parabens as exposure may lead to pregnancy complications⁹ for you and your baby.

Petrochemicals like propylene glycol, benzene, and benzoic acid can also alter the vaginal microbiome,¹¹ which may be important for your baby's health. An altered vaginal microbiome can also increase the chance of infections, which may lead to further pregnancy complications.¹²

If you suspect that you might have used lube with such ingredients, Smith suggests consulting with your health care provider about any potential risks.

She also notes that there hasn't been a lot of research conducted on some of these studies. "For instance, the one linking the use of parabens and gestational diabetes is the only one of its kind, so more research needs to be done in this area."

Still, it's best to take precautions about the ingredients in your lube, and the best way to do so is to use the safest lube out there: water-based lube.

"Water-based lubes, especially those that are made with organic ingredients, are considered the safest to use during pregnancy," explains Tanner. "Oil-based lubes may increase the risk of bacteria and infections."

Skin is much more sensitive during pregnancy, especially in the genital area. Tanner also recommends "avoid[ing] lubes that contain additives, such as flavors [and] fragrances, since they may alter the pH of the vagina and can cause skin irritation or allergic reactions."

Time to check those labels.

Q: "I'm not as flexible while having sex as I was before getting pregnant. Do you have any tips?"

A: A growing pregnancy bump can limit mobility and the ability to reach your genitals with certain sex toys. If that's true for you, a pillow or wedge (they come in a range of shapes and sizes) can be used to help support your body in different positions, or a remote-controlled sex toy can make it easier for you to maneuver.

Remote-controlled sex toys are typically placed in the vagina, and a physical remote or Bluetooth app is used to turn the toy on or off and switch between settings.

"These toys can be controlled by yourself during solo or partnered play, or you can let your partner control the settings for an element of surprise," explains Tanner.

Q: "I want to invest in some new sex toys, but I want to make sure they are pregnancy safe. What should I be looking for?"

A: Select toys that are “body safe,” but do your research about what ingredients they contain (body safe can be interpreted differently by different companies).

“Truly body safe means they’re phthalate free. Avoid plastic toys, as they may contain phthalates [a group of chemicals] that can disrupt hormones,” says Smith.

So what’s best?

“Jelly plastic toys are porous and can lead to vaginal infection because they can’t be properly sterilized. Medical-grade silicone, steel, and borosilicate glass are the safest toys, though note that glass and steel toys may feel too hard for your sensitive cervix during pregnancy,” Smith says.

Q: “I’m new to using sex toys. How can I make sure they’re clean and safe to use during pregnancy?”

A: Don’t forget, pregnant or not, it’s always important to maintain the hygiene of your sex toys by cleaning them with mild soap and warm water before and after each use.

“To disinfect a toy, you can boil it in water for three minutes if it’s nonmechanical and made of 100% silicone, stainless steel, or glass,” says Tanner.

“It is particularly important to disinfect toys if they are shared with partners whom you haven’t exchanged bodily fluids with before through unprotected sex; if you use the same toy anally and vaginally; or if the toy has come in contact with genitals during a yeast infection, bacterial infection, or sexually transmitted infection,” they add.

You can also always use condoms or other barrier methods with your toys to provide additional peace of mind about cleanliness.

REFERENCES

1. Von Sydow, Kirsten. “Sexuality during Pregnancy and after Childbirth: A Metacontent Analysis of 59 Studies.” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1999, pp. 27–49, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0022-3999\(98\)00106-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0022-3999(98)00106-8).
2. Jones, Claire, et al. “Sex in Pregnancy.” *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol. 183, no. 7, 19 Apr. 2011, pp. 815–18, <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.091580>.
3. Robertson, Sarah A., and David J. Sharkey. “Seminal Fluid and Fertility in Women.” *Fertility and Sterility*, vol. 106, no. 3, 2016, pp. 511–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2016.07.1101>.

4. Kho, Ee Min, et al. "Duration of Sexual Relationship and Its Effect on Preeclampsia and Small for Gestational Age Perinatal Outcome." *Journal of Reproductive Immunology*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2009, pp. 66–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jri.2009.04.011>.
5. "Weight Gain during Pregnancy." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternalinfanthealth/pregnancy-weight-gain.htm. Accessed 12 Sep. 2022.
6. Korgakvar, K., and F. Wang. "Stretch Marks during Pregnancy: A Review of Topical Prevention." *British Journal of Dermatology*, vol. 172, no. 3, Mar. 2015, pp. 606–15, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25255817/>.
7. Motosko, Catherine, et al. "Physiologic Changes of Pregnancy: A Review of the Literature." *International Journal of Women's Dermatology*, vol. 3, no. 4, Dec. 2017, pp. 219–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijwd.2017.09.003>.
8. Wenyu, Liu, et al. "Parabens Exposure in Early Pregnancy and Gestational Diabetes Mellitus." *Environment International*, vol. 126, May 2019, pp. 468–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2019.02.040>.
9. Qi, Zhong, et al. "Association of Prenatal Exposure to Phenols and Parabens with Birth Size: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Science of the Total Environment*, vol. 703, Feb. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.134720>.
10. Akram, Jamal, et al. "Prenatal Exposure to Parabens and Anthropometric Birth Outcomes: A Systematic Review." *Environmental Research*, vol. 173, June 2019, pp. 419–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2019.02.044>.
11. McElroy, Katie G., and Mary Regan. "Vaginal Microbiota and Lubricant Use During Labor: Implications for Nursing Research, Practice, and Policy." *SAGE Open Nursing*, Aug. 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2377960816662286>.
12. Mueller, Noel T., et al. "The Infant Microbiome Development: Mom Matters." *Trends In Molecular Medicine*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1 Feb. 2015, pp. 109–17, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.molmed.2014.12.002>.
13. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4928162/>
14. Motosko, Catherine, et al. "Physiologic Changes of Pregnancy: A Review of the Literature." *International Journal of Women's Dermatology*, vol. 3, no. 4, Dec. 2017, pp. 219–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijwd.2017.09.003>.
15. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1595041/>
16. Pfaus, James G., et al. "The Whole versus the Sum of Some of the Parts: Toward Resolving the Apparent Controversy of Clitoral versus Vaginal Orgasms." *Socioaffective Neuroscience and Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 1, 25 Oct. 2016, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/snp.v6.32578.

17. "Studies about Why Men and Women Use Lubricants during Sex." *Science Daily*, 9 Nov. 2009, Retrieved July 10, 2022 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/11/091109090431.htm.

EXPERTS

Casey Tanner: casey@theexpansivegroup.com

Erica Smith

ericasmith.med@gmail.com