



All about lube

Question

1) Hey Alice,

What is "lube?" I've heard a lot of "lubes" in your advice and answers to others, but I'm still unsure of what it really is. Is it some sort of lubrication?

Curious

2) Alice,

My lesbian partner and I just started having anal sex. There are several types of lubricants on the market. Are they all safe? Is silicone okay to use? Thank You for your help.

Answer

Dear Curious and Reader,

It's no wonder you're both seeking information on lubricant (or "lube"); it's a slippery subject with lots of moving parts. Lubricants are used to make sexual activity more comfortable and pleasurable by reducing friction. Lube can make masturbation more enjoyable and can facilitate vaginal or anal penetration with a toy or penis. Reader, as for what types of lubes are lowest risk with anal sex, it depends on a number of factors (more on this in a bit). The type of lube you choose depends on your safer sex needs, the sexual activities you're getting up to, and general preferences, so information gathering is an excellent first step in your journey of lubrication education.

Not only does lube increase pleasure, it also can help protect against sexual transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy, and tissue damage. Lube itself isn't considered a method of contraception or a prophylactic, but it can be a facilitator of risk reduction for both pregnancy and STIs by reducing friction that upholds the integrity of barrier methods when in use and reduces friction as a whole so that tissue damage is minimized. The friction created during sex can degrade and break condoms and cause micro-tears on the genitals, making it easier to contract an STI, and lube lessens this friction. It's especially key to use lube when engaging in anal play, as the anus doesn't lubricate itself naturally and has only a thin layer of skin that can rip and tear easily, making it easier to transmit STIs.

There are hundreds of choices of lube out there, but they fall into three main categories: water-based, silicone-based, and oil-based. Each type has different properties:

Water-based lubes tend to be the most user-friendly and all-purpose of the three types. They're safe to use with silicone toys and latex-based safer sex products such as condoms and dental dams. They're relatively easy to clean and generally aren't irritating (although some water-based lube contains glycerin, which has been known to cause vaginal yeast infections in some). The main complaint about water-based lubes is that they dry out more quickly than the others, so reapplication may be required. There's been some limited research that suggests that water-based lubricants may have some increased risks of STI transmission when used with the anus, but there isn't enough information to draw any firm conclusions on the matter.

Silicone-based lubes are a popular alternative to water-based products, as they can also be used with latex products, but are longer lasting and can hold up in water without being washed off. The flip side, however, is that silicone lube can be messier — soap and water is often needed to clean it up. Another thing to keep in mind is that silicone lube degrades silicone toys, so opt for water-based lube or cover the toy with a condom to avoid mishaps.

Oil-based lubes may be useful for masturbation with a penis, but aren't recommended for other sexual acts. Oil breaks down latex, which increases the risk of STI contraction and pregnancy, and it can leave a coating on the vagina or rectum that could cause infection. As such, they aren't recommended for anal sex. These kinds of lubes can also easily stain fabric.

Within these broader categories, you can find more specific kinds of lube, such as flavored lubes for oral sex or lubes that contain a spermicide such as nonoxynol-9. Note that nonoxynol-9 can cause irritation, which may increase the risk of spreading STIs. If you have sensitive skin, you may want to do a spot-test on your inner arm or thigh the day before you plan to use any new lube to make sure you don't have an unwanted allergic reaction.

There are many factors to consider when choosing the perfect lube for you. Hopefully, you're now armed with the tools to slide into the world of lubrication confidently and safely.

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