

Know your Lubricants –“lubes”

Vaginal lubrication happens naturally during sexual excitement and arousal. Variation in lubrication is quite normal and the amount of lubrication produced is influenced by hormonal changes, breastfeeding, medication, some auto-immune diseases, smoking, chemotherapy/radiation, lack of arousal and menopause. Dehydration can also cause a decrease in lubrication.

This means that a woman may feel aroused and interested in sex but may still not be lubricated enough. Good lubrication is key to more comfortable, pleasurable and safer sex.

The benefits of using a lube

- Improves sexual arousal by stimulating blood flow which can help the body to make more natural lubrication.
- Lubricates the clitoris - this can really help increase comfort, arousal and pleasure.
- Helps maintain elasticity and good condition of the vaginal walls.
- Reduces vaginal dryness and protects sensitive genital tissues from tears and irritation.
- Prevents condoms from tearing during intercourse.
- Increase comfort and safety inserting sexual enhancement toys or vaginal dilators etc
- Increases comfort and pleasure when stimulating the penis.

All lubes are not created equal!

Knowing more about the ingredients that go into a lube can help decide which lubes are safest and best for your particular needs. Using the right lubricant can make the world of difference to your experience of sexual pleasure and comfort as well as protect your body from injury, irritation, infection and failed contraception.

Ideally you want to look for a lube that has an acidity (pH) level closest to natural levels and is not too concentrated with preservatives or additives.

There are 4 different types of lubricants:

Water-based lube

Silicone-based lube

Oil-based lube

Petroleum-based lube

Water-Based Lubricants

Water-based lubes are generally considered to be the best lubes for vaginal health as they have been associated with fewer genital side effects and feel similar to natural lubrication. Most commonly sold lubricants are water-based with added glycerin, which produces a slightly sweet taste. Vegetable derived glycerin is preferable to the synthetic version (propylene glycol) as it may be less likely to trigger yeast type infections like thrush. It is advisable to check that the concentration of glycerin is not too concentrated.

Pros:

- Not too expensive.
- Safe to use with latex condoms.
- Does not usually stain fabric.
- Easy to clean off the body and therefore limits growth of infection causing bacteria, near urethra.
- Least likely to cause irritation and allergic reaction in sensitive genital tissue.
- Easy to clean off sex toys and pelvic exercisers.

Cons:

- Dries out more quickly than other lubes.
- Often sticky or tacky,
- Synthetic glycerin may trigger yeast infections in women who are prone to them.

TIP! Adding a little water to a water based lube that is getting dry will make it nice and slippery again.

Water based lubricants that have a low Ph have low concentration and do not contain parabens include **Sylk Natural**, **YES Vaginal moisturiser**, **Pjur med Sensitive Glide** and **Hydra Natural Glide**.

Silicone-Based Lube

Silicone based lubricants are not absorbed by the skin but stay on the surface, this makes them last longer. They may be recommended for women with genital pain.

Pros:

- Safe with latex condoms
- Waterproof.
- Odourless and tasteless.
- Last three times as long as water-based lubricants making them more durable.
- Does not typically cause skin irritation or allergy (check before use if you are prone)
- Does not usually contain parabens (a type of preservative)
- Less likely to harbor bacteria than oil-based lubricants.
- Are not absorbed by skin.

Cons:

- Expensive
- May damage the surface of silicone sex toys or pelvic exercisers
- Difficult to remove from tissues (require soap which can irritate vaginal tissues)
- Can erode the surfaces of pelvic exercisers made from silicone
- Can stain fabric.

Silicon lubricants that low allergenic include **Pjur med Premium Glide**.

Oil-Based Lube

Oil-based lubricants may be derived from either synthetic or natural oils.

Natural oil-based lube: coconut oil, almond oil, olive oil.

Pros

- Natural oils are usually preservative and additive free making them less likely to irritate than lubricants containing additives.
- Some of the natural oils can be soothing and healing for their skin e.g. vitamin E oil, coconut oil and jojoba oil.
- Do not dry up quickly.
- Low cost
- Non- toxic
- Can be also be used for massaging other parts of the body.

Cons

- Harder to clean off skin and sexual enhancement toys. Oil left on skin may increase the likelihood of infection-causing bacteria living on surfaces.
- May increased risk of yeast infection (thrush)
- Cleaning off skin surfaces requires soap for removal and soap is a known irritant for vaginal tissues
- Cannot be used with latex condoms or diaphragms.
- Can stain fabric

NB: General body massage oils or oils which include essential oils or fragrance scents are not recommended as personal lubricants as they can cause irritation.

Synthetic oil-based lube: baby oil, Vaseline.

Products such as mineral oil, Vaseline and body lotion are long lasting, but they can cause inflammation, harbour infection causing bacteria and cannot be used with condoms.

Why women should avoid lubricants with High pH (Acidity)

The vagina is a naturally acidic environment fully equipped with powerful bacteria that fends off many infections. A healthy vaginal pH level is between 3.5-4.5. The World Health Organization recommends that women avoid personal lubricants with high pH as this increases the risk of an imbalance in the naturally occurring bacteria within the vagina and causes bacterial vaginosis. The best lube for maintaining healthy levels of vaginal bacteria has pH of close to 4.5.

Are preservatives and additives in lubes bad?

Preservatives are used in most products applied to the skin. Some form of preservative needs to be used to prevent bacterial growth and keep the product safe to use. Some preservatives can cause tissue irritation and sensitization in some women.

It may be difficult to find a lube that does not contain any preservative but the following points will help you avoid irritation and allergic reaction.:

- Check the amount of preservative – there should be just enough to prevent microbial growth and no more than absolutely necessary (how to check the ingredient list*)
- Look out for products that have more than one preservative listed
- If you are concerned then avoid: parabens, polyquaternum and chlorhexidene.
- Be aware that some well-known products do not provide a list of the ingredients.

A note about parabens

One commonly used form of preservatives used in lubes is a group of chemical compounds known as parabens. Parabens have been known to cause an allergic reaction in some individuals but there is a lot of disagreement over the safety of parabens despite their widespread use.

To date there is no scientific evidence linking parabens to cancer and they are considered safe in low levels by the US Food and Drug Administration and the World Health Organisation. There is however some concern since parabens mimic oestrogen and can be stored in the human body and may build up over time. If you are concerned about parabens then check the lube ingredients for the word “paraben” in the ending of the chemical name. My personal choice is to avoid parabens.

Additives in Lubes

Additives in lubricants that may cause irritation include:

- **Stimulants** e.g. menthol, peppermint
- **Plant-derived** e.g. citric acid
- **Spermicide** e.g. Nonoxynol-9 which has been associated with damage to vaginal and anal tissues.
- **Antibacterial agents** e.g. chlorohexidine (unbalance the natural flora potentially increasing the likelihood of vaginal infection)
- **Flavourings**
- **Fragrance**
- **High concentrations of propylene glycol or glycerol as this may cause irritation. (Warming lubes often contain high concentrations of these substances.)**

Tip: Generally the highest amounts of ingredients are listed first which may make it easier to identify potentially high concentrations of irritating ingredients.

Main Points for Choosing the Best Lube for your Pelvic Health

- No one lube fits everyone's needs.
- Use a lube that is most similar to the body's natural lubrication
- If you are prone to allergy or vaginal irritation you definitely need to know your lube ingredients.
- If you are prone to vaginal irritation and infection ideally choose a natural glycerin and paraben free water-based lube.
- Avoid lube additives and preservatives that are known to be irritating.
- Avoid lubes with spermicides and highly concentrated ingredients.
- Make sure your lube will not damage condoms, sex toys or pelvic exercisers.
- Use a lube that has a low PH

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