THE SEXUAL HEALTH TEAM PRESENTS....

COVID-19 Dating and Hookup Safety Guide

We've had to adapt all our activities during COVID-19. Sex is no exception.

A Student Wellness Centre Health Promotion Initiative
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Welcome! You’ve landed on the Sexual Health Team’s COVID-19 Dating and Hookup Safety Guide with the Student Wellness Centre at McMaster University. This resource was created with the goal of providing students safer options to explore their sexuality in the COVID-19 pandemic as well as relevant information on risks of sexual activities they may engage in.

We’ve laid out this document from lowest to highest risk sex and dating activities. Along the way we’ve addressed the specific risks you could encounter with each activity and have provided some harm reduction tips so that, should you engage in these activities, you can do so in the safest way possible.

Disclaimer: The Sexual Health Team, the Student Wellness Centre, and McMaster University are not encouraging any activities discussed within this resource. All the safety tips are through the lens of harm reduction. As the Sexual Health Team, we acknowledge that some students may choose to engage in partnered sexual activities despite isolation guidelines. It is our hope that students may use this resource to gain insight in safer sex practices that don’t expose them to COVID-19 or at least utilize our harm reduction tips to stay as safe as possible during partnered sex.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY "SEX"?
Typically thought of as solely penetrative acts, we encourage people to realize that sex can be whatever activities are sexually enjoyable to you. With this updated definition, a healthy sex life during COVID-19 doesn’t demand physical interaction.

WHAT IS HARM REDUCTION?
Harm reduction is a health promotion practice that aims to decrease the risk of activities which are typically discouraged, poorly regarded, or otherwise criminalized. In the context of COVID-19, we employ a method of harm reduction by defining safer practices for sexual and dating activities.
CONSENT
A voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity.

An easy way to remember the major principles of consent is using the acronym **FRIES**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Freely Given</th>
<th>Consent can only be given in the absence of pressure, force, manipulation, or while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reversible</td>
<td>Anyone can change their mind about what they’re comfortable with at any point, even if it’s something you’ve done before or you’re in the middle of doing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed</td>
<td>Consent can only be given if all measures requested to make both partners comfortable were honoured, such as following through after agreeing to use a condom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>Consent requires both partners to be enthusiastic and willing to take part in each sexual activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Saying yes to one activity (like making out) doesn’t mean they’ve consented to other activities (like oral sex).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONSENT IS NOT:

- Involuntary physiological responses such as erections, lubrication (i.e. getting wet), arousal, or orgasm. These can occur even when the person is not consenting to the activity.
- Assuming someone wants to have sex based on their clothes or flirtatious actions.
- Refusing to acknowledge it when someone indicates they don’t want sex such as rushing to initiate sexual activity when your partner asks you to “slow down”.
- As a young adult, having sex with anyone under the age of 16.
- Disregarding power dynamics by engaging in sexual activity with someone whom you have authority over.
- Having sex with someone who agreed to activities while drunk or high.
- Pressuring someone who previously agreed to have sex with you to have sex again.
MASTURBATION AND FANTASY

**What are masturbation and fantasy?**

What causes sexual pleasure and arousal differs from person to person. Masturbation and fantasy can occur simultaneously or on their own.

### MASTURBATION

The act of touching yourself/your body in a way that is sexually stimulating

### FANTASY

Mental imagery or thought patterns associated with erotica and/or sexual arousal

**Orgasm misconceptions & masturbation expectations**

While masturbation can lead to an orgasm, it is not the ‘be all’ or ‘end all’ of masturbators. Masturbation and fantasy are normal and healthy ways to learn about your body. There is no reason to feel badly if you are unable to orgasm.

Experimenting with masturbation and fantasy allows you to learn more about your likes and dislikes, helping you to understand what you want and may want to communicate to a potential partner.

**Privacy**

Everyone’s living situation is different, and with it, their definition of privacy. If you are living with others privacy may be a concern of yours. Some ways to increase your privacy are:

- Masturbate with the doors locked
- Masturbate underneath a blanket
- Masturbate in the shower
- Masturbate when no one is home
- Play music while you masturbate

**Setting the mood:** You can be your greatest sex partner

Despite what you may have been taught, you don’t need someone else to satisfy your sexual cravings. Get yourself in the mood and treat yourself like you might want a sexual partner to treat you. You could try:

- Light candles/turn down the lights
- Watch a pornographic video
- Read erotica
- Take a warm bath/use creams or oils
- Create a sexy playlist
- Masturbate in front of a mirror
- Practice deep breathing
- Turn off your phone or other distractions
Sex toys are not a requirement for masturbation or fantasy, but they can help in creating a pleasurable experience. There are many types of sex toys including vibrators, dildos, nipple clamps, anal toys, penis rings, and many more.

**CLEANING SEX TOYS**
Wash your sex toys with mild soap and water before each use, especially if they are being shared with another person to prevent STI transmission. Alternatively, put a new condom on with each use or when sharing with someone else.

**USING LUBRICANT**
Lube can help prevent a painful, uncomfortable, or unsafe experience. Lubricant is necessary during anal play as the anus does not lubricate itself.

**DO NOT USE SILICONE LUBE WITH SILICONE SEX TOYS**
Silicone lubricant can react with solid silicone and damage it. A water-based lubricant is safest for sex toys if you are unsure about the material.

Sex toys can be purchased at specialty stores (sometimes called sex shops, adult stores, or sex stores) however there may be age restrictions to these stores. Alternatively, many companies have websites where you can purchase and have products shipped discreetly.
MEETING PEOPLE ONLINE

Dating and meeting new people under normal circumstances can be a frustrating and time-consuming process; during a pandemic, this is even more challenging. Dating apps can be a great way to meet people, but it’s a good idea to consider what you are looking for before diving in.

So you've matched with the person of your dreams. Now what?

**Asking about: physical (social) distancing**

“What does social/physical distancing mean to you?”

Be honest with them about what you are comfortable with.

**Asking about: dating app expectations**

“What are you looking for online?” Give the person the opportunity to tell you if they’re looking for a relationship, hookup, casual online dating, etc. Don’t assume what they want.

Getting off the app

Be cautious about giving a person your phone number or other identifying details like your home address. Consider asking a friend for their opinion of the trustworthiness of your match. Other people may be able to pick up on red flags that you miss when you are in the heightened emotional state of talking to a new person that you like.

Go over what physical distancing means to you if you’re meeting up. Make sure to discuss whether you are having a “distance date” and ask for their permission if you want to break physical distancing rules.

Discuss your desire to meet this person with those you live with if you are not planning on following physical distancing measures.

If you’ve started talking to someone, but you’ve realized you’re not interested, you can always say no. A simple message like ‘Hey, it was nice meeting you, but I’m not really interested in taking this any further’ is perfectly okay.

Spotting Catfishing

A catfish is someone who creates a fake profile to deceive people into thinking they are someone else. Some red flags for catfishing include: their photos looking screenshotted or low quality, if they refuse to video call you, or the messages they send you appear rehearsed. If you are concerned about whether they are a catfish, try searching the person’s photos using Google Search by Image; if their image appears on several sites linked to different names or modelling agencies, the person may be a catfish.
Not everyone wants to have sex right now and that is okay! Some people may still want to get to know others during the pandemic, so here are some safer ways you can do so, both online and in-person.

VIRTUAL DATING: NO COVID-19 TRANSMISSION RISK

- **Netflix party** – Why not start a new show together and learn all about your partner’s taste in TV and movies!
- **Buzzfeed quizzes** – Discover what kind of dessert you are from the comfort of your own home with your new cutie!
- **Zoom Games** – Games such as asskribbl.io or Among Us are all the rage! Create a discord server and play together.
- **Virtual Arts & Culture Events** – The Toronto Arts Council has compiled a list of museums offering online tours!

IN-PERSON DATING: LOW COVID-19 TRANSMISSION RISK

Want to see your partner while staying safe and preventing the spread of COVID-19? Here are some guidelines you can follow:

- **Wear a mask**
- **Practice physical distancing** – stay 6ft/2m apart
- **Wash your hands often** – use hand sanitizer when you can’t access a sink
- **Try dates that don’t require you to be close together**
  - Go on a hike or a bike ride together – stay safe and stay active!
  - Picnic – a safe, socially distanced outdoor activity

PLANNING TO GO TO YOUR PARTNER’S HOUSE?

**Important topics to discuss:**
- Do either of you have symptoms of COVID-19 and not yet been tested?
- Have either of you been outside of the country in the past 14 days?
- Have either of you been in contact with COVID-19 and not yet been tested?
- Have you both been properly physical distancing with those outside your social circle?
- Do you have immuno-compromised people in your social circle which you are concerned for regarding COVID-19 transmission?
- How many people are in both your social circles? Are you planning on being in one social bubble together if you are not respecting social distancing?
Sexting, phone, and video sex are ways to be sexually active without potentially transmitting COVID-19.

**SEXTING: SEXUALLY EXPLICIT OR SUGGESTIVE MESSAGES AND PHOTOS**

**Not sure where to start with your partner?**
- Tell them your sexual fantasies
- Describe what you would want to do with them
- Recount previous sexual encounters
- Use suggestive emojis
- Send nude or semi-nude photos; try different angles

Just remember: **timing is important**. Ask your partner what they're doing before sexting them.

**VIDEO SEX & PHONE SEX**

A conversation or video call in which sexually explicit content is shared.

**Ways to Have Phone/Video Sex**
- Describe what you’re doing, what you’re imagining, what you’re feeling
- Tell your partner what about them turns you on
- Masturbate together!
- Experiment with role-play
- Show each other your bodies (refer to pg. 10 for consent online)
- Use of lingerie or sex toys may help to add a new element

**Organizing your online sex-capade**
- Schedule a time that works for both of you
- Find a private place and set the mood (i.e. dim the lights, light candles, whatever makes you feel sexy)
- Give yourself time to adjust to this new medium for sexual intimacy, don’t be discouraged if you have some awkward moments
**BEING SAFE WHILE ENGAGING IN VIRTUAL SEX**

**ADAPTING CONSENT ONLINE**
After following through on all the consent requirements covered earlier in this guide, there are a few additional consent topics you should take into consideration if you are planning on engaging in virtual sex.

**SENDING NUDES**
Someone may be interested in sleeping with you, but have they clearly expressed interest in wanting to exchange sexually explicit photos of you?

**NON-VERBAL SIGNALS**
It is more difficult to gauge how someone else is feeling virtually with the absence of body language and facial expressions. It is important to discuss the boundaries, wants, and needs of your virtual sex life with your partner.

**AGE**
It is illegal to obtain or send explicit content with anyone under the age 18. If you are unsure if someone is underage, ask.

**PRIVACY PROTECTION**
Sharing explicit photos of someone else without their consent is a crime.

**RISKS OF ONLINE USAGE & HOW TO STAY SAFER**
Virtual sex may be a great alternative to having sex in person during COVID-19. However, there are always risks to engaging sexually online, which we urge you to consider before trying it out.

**SENDING NUDES**
To protect your privacy when sending photos, capture images without your face or identifiable features (i.e. tattoos, piercings, and birthmarks).

**NON-VERBAL SIGNALS**
If you are exchanging explicit messages with someone you don’t know in person, instead of using your own personal accounts, you can create new emails or social media accounts to protect your anonymity.

**AGE**
Become familiar with the platform or software you are using. You may prefer apps that do not allow content to be saved or notify you if someone screenshots what you send.

**PRIVACY PROTECTION**
Keep your nudes or videos in a secure online storage with a passcode.
IN-PERSON HOOKUPS
Safety during COVID-19

We are not encouraging any sexual activities. We recognize that some students will be engaging in these activities regardless of COVID-19 guidelines. For this reason, we aim to provide recommendations that help to keep students safer when participating in high-risk hookup activities.

Harm reduction tips to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission

- Mutual masturbation at least six feet apart
- Avoid or limit kissing and saliva exchange
- Choose sexual positions that limit face-to-face contact
- Wear a mask if face-to-face during sex
- Reduce your number of sexual partners

Communication with your partner(s) about COVID-19 risks

Ask your sexual partner(s):

- Have you been diagnosed with or do you have symptoms of COVID-19?
- Have you been outside of the country in the past 14 days?
- Have you potentially been exposed to COVID-19 and not been tested negative yet?

If they answer “yes” to any of these questions, it's best to abstain from all intimate contact until a minimum of 7 days since symptoms began and all symptoms have stopped for at least 72 hours without the use of medications.

Discuss with your sexual partner(s) how many partners each of you have. Be aware of the increased risk.

Include your sexual partner(s) in your 10-person social circle
- If not, communicate with your partner(s) about who is in yours

As always, remember to take the necessary steps to prevent STI transmission and unwanted pregnancy:

- Get tested for STIs at least once a year and discuss STI testing history. It’s good practice to get tested before having sex with someone new too.
- Be aware of contraceptive options (e.g. the pill, condom, IUD, etc.)
- Use barrier methods to reduce risk of contracting STIs and protect against unwanted pregnancy (e.g. condoms, dental dams)
You've made it to the end of the Sexual Health Team's COVID-19 Dating and Hookup Safety Guide!

Thank you for being a part of this project! We hope you've learned something that will benefit your sex or dating experiences in the future. The harm reduction principles used in this guide can be applied to various circumstances. Everyone deserves access to information that will empower them to make informed decisions about their health, wellness, and livelihoods.

Who are we? (i.e. The Sexual Health Team)

The Sexual Health Team is one of the Wellness Outreach Teams from the Student Wellness Centre. We are a student-run team that meets weekly to work on initiatives to bring to you the sexual health content you need. Our goal is to provide students resources they require in order to make wise and healthy decisions along their sexual health journey. We are advocates for proactive health promotion through harm reduction and sex-positivity. The team uses holistic and social perspectives to determine what sexual health looks like for students.

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