

Dental Dams

What is a dental dam?

The dental dam is a square piece of thin latex, much like the latex in condoms that is used to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when oral sex is performed on an anal or vaginal opening. When used, the dental dam is stretched across the anal opening or a woman's vagina to prevent exchange of bodily fluids. Unlike condoms, the dental dam itself is not lubricated, but using a water-based lubricant on the vagina/anal side of the dental dam may be useful in helping to keep it in place, and to increase sensation. Dental dams come in plain and flavored latex squares or a flavored water-based lubricant may be used to enhance the taste during oral sex. If you do not have a "dental dam", it is also possible to use plastic wrap, or a cut-open condom to cover the vulva or anus. Dental dams help to reduce the risk of HIV virus transmission during oral-vaginal and oral-anal sex, in addition to other diseases which can be transmitted from mouth to vagina/anus or vice -versa, including herpes and genital warts.

How effective is a dental dam?

When used properly, dams provide an effective barrier to the exchange of bodily fluids during oral sexual activity. Dental dams can significantly reduce the risk of coming in contact with a sexually transmitted infection, but are not 100%. Only abstinence is 100% effective.

How much does it cost and where can I get one?

Dental dams run from 50 cents to around \$3 per dam, depending on size, color, flavor, etc. Buying a multi-pack makes them cheaper. Since dental dams can be made out of condoms or latex gloves (or Saran Wrap), you can get the makings of one almost anywhere. If you are looking for the real thing though, they are pretty much only available at local erotic shops and online. Dental dams are not yet available in many drug stores or pharmacies.

The SCC Health Education Office offers free dental dams to University of Chicago students. If you would like one, please come the Student Care Center.

How to use a dental dam

When using (or making) a dental dam be certain that the dam covers the entire vulva or anal opening and that it can be held at both edges. Be careful not to turn the dam inside-out during oral sex, as this defeats the purpose of not coming in contact with your partner's bodily fluids. Dental dams can also be used for oral-anal and oralvaginal sex by both men and women, to help prevent transmission of sexually transmitted infections. Finally, never re-use condoms or dental dams!

- Step 1: Many dental dams come flavored. If you have a non-flavored dam, rinse the powdery talc from the dental dam, pat dry with a towel or let air dry.
- Step 2: Place water-based lubricant (i.e. K-Y jelly®, WET®) on the side of the dam that will face either the vagina or the anus. Like a condom, oil based lubricants damage the effectiveness of the dental dam as they can break down the latex, which most dental dams are made of.
- Step 3: Place the dental dam over the vagina or anus. Do not move the same dam back and forth between the vagina and anus as this can cause infection and defeat the purpose of using a dam.
- Step 4: Handle the dental dam carefully so it does not rip. Like condoms, dental dams work on the concept of being a barrier to block the exchange of bodily fluids. Even a small hole could cause much damage. Therefore, do not chew or bite on the dam during oral sex or a hole will develop.
- Step 4: Throw away the dam after each use. Do not share or reuse dams. Only use one side of the dam.

Dental dams *are not reusable after sexual activity - even after washing them.*

What are the advantages to dental dams?

- Dental dams are now being marketed more widely to both heterosexual and gay populations.
- Dams come in flavors and colors designed to make them more pleasurable and exciting.
- Dams provide a new and unique sensation.
- Dams offer protection against oral transmission of sexually transmitted infections.

What are the disadvantages to dental dams?

- Dental dams do not protect against pregnancy as they are not intended to be used for anal or vaginal intercourse.
- Some feel that using a dental dam takes away some of the sensation.
- The dental dam must be held in place at all times, which means someone's hands are not free. To reduce this challenge some dams are made with adhesive so they stick in place and both people are free to move their hands wherever they want. Other options: use one of yours and your partners' hands to hold the dam or purchase a "dammit", which is a harness that holds a dental dam in place
- Using a dental dam can be messy, so keep tissue by the bed.

What are the risks of using dental dams?

Latex dental dams (also those made from condoms or medical gloves) should not be used by or on persons with a latex allergy. If you do have a latex allergy and want to use a dental dam, consider using Saran Wrap® or cut open a female Reality® condom or Avanti® male condom (made from polyurethane).