

A-Z OF CONSENT, EMPOWERMENT AND RESPECT



All bodies are beautiful

Our relationship with our body can be complicated. Your body might look and feel different at different times and the things your body does, or can do, might also change.

Many of us are taught that there is a right way to be 'beautiful' and the pressure to follow narrow, unrealistic beauty standards can be overwhelming and disempowering. It can be hard, but it is important for us all to challenge the idea that we should look a certain way, or feel a certain way about our bodies. There is no right or wrong way for your body to look!



Body hair – go bare or leave it there

Whether you have a little or a lot, body hair is nothing to be embarrassed about. It is completely natural and normal. It's time to change the idea that being feminine means having long, silky hair on our heads and no hair anywhere else. We all have hair. It's on our heads, our legs, our arms, our faces, our genitals, our stomachs, our boobs and even our toes! It's your choice whether you want to keep some, none, or all of your hair. Different factors might influence your decisions and it is important to think about why we do what we do with our bodies. Why are so many of us taught to see our natural body hair as embarrassing, or ugly? This is an interesting question. But at the end of the day, what you do with your body hair is nobody else's business.



Consent – it's a two-way street

Consent is fundamental to being intimate with someone. Both you and your partner need to be enthusiastic, eager and in agreement about any of the sexual or romantic activity you're having. The only way to know for sure that someone consents, is if they tell you. Check in with your partner and be mindful of their body language and how they feel. Think about how much more enjoyable sex will be if you're both excited to be doing it! Remember that if consent is given for one thing, this does not mean it is given for anything else. Consent can be withdrawn at any time and it is crucial to respect this.

Having sex with someone without their consent is sexual assault and it is a crime. For more information on consent visit [WIRE's info on sexual consent](#). There are laws around consent and sex, which you can read more about on the [Legal Aid website](#).



Diversity – celebrate it!

You might think that people easily fall into categories - but humans aren't that simple. There are many things that make us unique, including our sexuality, sex and gender. We are often expected to act and look certain ways, but it's okay to express yourself the way you feel best. It often takes time to figure out who you are. The pressure to identify with particular labels often limits our ability to express who we really are. Who we are is ever-changing, our individual differences are something to celebrate and everyone should be valued and respected. Follow these links for more information: [Rainbow Network](#), [Minus 18](#), [Intersex Human Rights Australia](#), [Freedom Centre](#).



Equality and respect – key to every relationship

Equality and respect are vital foundations to any healthy relationship – romantic, sexual, or otherwise. A healthy relationship involves respecting each other's needs and feeling comfortable to communicate with each other honestly. Everyone has different needs and if you and your partner understand each other's perspectives, it makes it easier to work through issues together and fairly. Both partners in a relationship are equal, this means that both of you feel heard and nobody is making you do things that you don't want to. It's important to maintain boundaries and equal power in a relationship, instead of control. Even in a relationship, you have your own life and should be able to make your own decisions about who you see and what you do. You would want this independence, so respect it in your partner too! If you are feeling unsafe or are worried about your relationship you can contact 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit their [website](#) to talk via online chat.



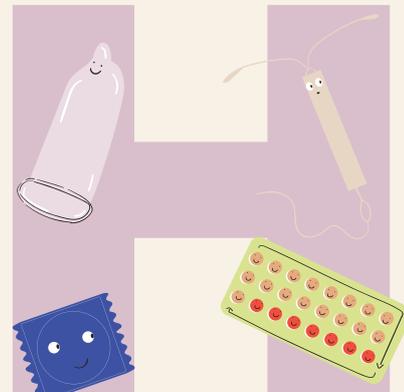
Get tested!

Good news! The pap smear has been replaced with a cervical screen which detects the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). You only need to have this test every 5 years. It's a quick test and is the best form of protection against cervical cancer. You should be getting this test if you have a cervix, you're sexually active and aged 25 or above. It's also important to get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). You only need an STI check once a year, or a few more if you're having sex with different partners. It's a good idea to get tested if you notice symptoms, if you've had unprotected sex, and when you're starting a new relationship. For more information and to find out where you can get tested, visit [Better Health Vic](#).



Feminism is for everyone

Put simply, feminism is about believing in equality and respect for all genders. You don't need to be a woman to be a feminist. Feminism is about ensuring that everyone can make informed choices and have equal opportunities, regardless of their sex or gender. Feminism recognises that throughout history, women have been treated unfairly. Women have been viewed as less important, or less valuable than men, and they have had less rights and opportunities. Feminists share the common aim of creating a fairer and safer world for women and girls, including ending violence against women. Obviously, not all women have the same experiences – many women experience additional oppression and discrimination due to their race, religion, class, age, ability or sexuality, so there is no 'one-size-fits-all' form of feminism. Everyone can get behind the ideas of feminism!



Have safe sex – use protection

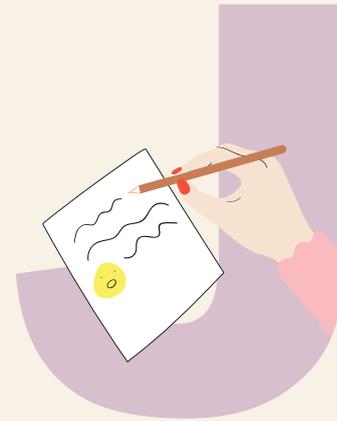
Sex is fun, but there are responsibilities that come with it. One of which is protecting yourself and your partner from STIs and unplanned pregnancy. Condoms are the only contraceptive that prevent both STIs and pregnancy. They are easily accessible, and you can buy them at supermarkets, clinics, chemists and even condom vending machines! Condoms aren't for everyone and there are a number of contraceptive alternatives such as the pill and long acting reversible contraception. For women having sex with women, an oral [dam](#) can be used to prevent STIs. Condoms and dams provide the best protection from STIs. If you decide not to use them, make sure you and your partner are free from STIs. It might be awkward, but being open with your partner about having safe sex means you can discuss what works best for you both. Visit [Better Health Channel – contraception choices](#) or contact [1800 My Options](#) to find something that works for you.



Identity – embrace all that you are

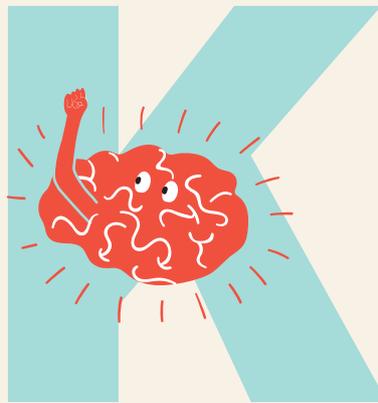
Our identity is our understanding of ourselves. From the day we are born and throughout our life, our experiences shape who we are. We grow as we experience life, and everyone will be doing so differently. It is our differences that make us who we are, including our values, beliefs, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and so much more.

Our identity is always changing and there isn't a need to label ourselves. It takes time to know who you are, but we should always be proud of our identity. Embrace all of the wonderful things that make you unique – focus on your interests and passions and what you truly enjoy doing. We all deserve respect. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed of your differences, we are all different, but we are all equal and deserve to express our authentic selves!



Jot it down – keep note of changes in your body

Period pain... if you're someone who gets periods, then you are likely to know what this feels like. It's normal to experience some discomfort and bloating each month, but severe pain is not something you should ignore. It's not just period pain we should be mindful of, any changes in our bodies such as mood, appetite and energy levels are worth taking note of. Our body tells us what it needs, and we should pay attention to its signals. Being in tune with our bodies makes this a lot easier. If we can recognise how our bodies feel when we are healthy and are mindful of how our body functions normally, then we can better recognise when something might be wrong. Get to know the usual shape of your breasts and check for any changes. Click [here](#) for tips on how to do a self-check. It's important to have a trusted, safe and supportive person to share your concerns with, whether this be a friend, family member or healthcare professional. Don't ignore pain! If you feel like something is wrong, jot it down and seek advice.



Knowledge is power – know your rights

It is important to be informed so that you can make the best decisions for yourself. With so much information about sexual and reproductive health out there, being able to filter reliable information can be overwhelming. Knowing your rights can help you understand information, and the services available to you. You have the right to make informed and supported choices about your health, which means you deserve access to service providers that are safe and inclusive and who give you reliable information. You have the right to make choices and be given accessible options regarding contraception and pregnancy. You also have the right to healthy relationships with safe and satisfying sexual experiences. Your sexual and reproductive health can be tricky to navigate but knowing your rights and where to go for information can help you get the support you need. Here are some great sources of info:

[Switchboard – peer based support for LGBTIQ people](#)

[Thorne Harbour Health – info and support for sex, sexuality and gender diverse communities](#)

[1800 My Options - info about contraception, pregnancy options and sexual health](#)

[Better Health Channel – wide range of health information](#)

[Minus18 – support and information for LGBTIQ youth](#)

[Melbourne Sexual Health Clinic – information and clinical services](#)

[Family Planning Victoria – fact sheets about sexual and reproductive health](#)



Learn about your body

Could you confidently say that you know how your body works and what goes on inside it? Many people don't know much about their sexual anatomy. This includes the stuff inside and outside of our bodies. Do you know what the clitoris looks like? Click [here](#) to find out. Although we might not be able to see some of our sexual and reproductive body parts, they are just as important to our health as our heart, lungs and brain. The more we know about our bodies, the better we can take care of them. Whether this is noticing when we feel unwell, or knowing when our bodies feel good - having an understanding of your body will help you feel more comfortable with yourself and with others.



Moon cups, pads or tampons?

Choose what's right for you

In Australia, folks who menstruate (have periods), will use up to 12,000 disposable menstrual products in their lifetime. Menstrual products are used so often, it makes sense that you choose something that you're comfortable with. Thankfully, there are more options available than ever before. Whether it be tampons, pads, menstrual cups or absorbent underwear – choose what works best for you. Important things to consider include how easily you can access it, the ongoing cost, your lifestyle and of course they need to be comfortable, you'll be using them every month!

[Read up about menstrual products](#) and [find out more about menstruation](#).



Normalise everyday conversations about sex

Our sexuality is much more than just sex. It's about our bodies, how we are feeling, our attractions and how we express ourselves. It's complex! We can't expect to navigate all of that on our own, without any conversations with those around us. Talking about these things can be uncomfortable, it's not something that we're used to doing and it can be awkward and scary. But being able to have these conversations will deepen your knowledge and allow you to feel more comfortable about changes in your body and the experiences that you have. Talk to your friends, your partner, your family or your doctor – the people that you trust. It's time to move past the shame and stigma surrounding sex and sexuality. It is a big part of who we are and how we feel, and we should embrace this and consider it being as important as all of the other aspects of ourselves and our lives.



Oops! Forgot to use protection?

You have options

Sometimes things happen in the heat of the moment and, despite our best efforts at being prepared, slip ups can happen. You might have had sex without protection, or maybe a condom slipped off during sex. Whatever the case, it can be a stressful time but there are steps you can take to help you avoid an [STI](#), [HIV](#) or an unplanned pregnancy. It's a good idea to get tested after having unprotected sex to check for

STIs or pregnancy. Medication called [post-exposure prophylaxis \(PEP\)](#) can be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex to reduce the risk of possible exposure to HIV. [Emergency contraception](#), which will help prevent pregnancy, can also be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex. If you are pregnant and you don't want to continue the pregnancy, you can access a safe and legal medical abortion (MTO) or a surgical abortion (STOP). For further information, contact 1800 My Options - 1800 696 784 or visit www.1800myoptions.org.au



Pleasure – explore what feels good for you

Sex is a natural and healthy part of life and it is something that should be fun and enjoyable! People may have sex to get pregnant, but sex is also about experiencing pleasure. To have the best sexual experiences, it helps to understand what you like and what feels good for you. This is something to consider whether you are being intimate with yourself or with others. Wanting pleasurable sex is not something to feel embarrassed about and the best way to achieve satisfying sex is to be open and communicate with your partner. Let people know what feels good and what does not. Sex should be an enjoyable experience for everyone involved, explore what you want and make a practice of mutually sharing this with your sexual partner.



Quality healthcare – find a service that supports you

Everyone has the right to access quality healthcare. This includes healthcare providers who you can communicate with, who will take confidentiality seriously and who make you feel safe and respected. You deserve this level of care and should expect it regardless of your age, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability or religious views. Our sexual and reproductive health is just as important as the other aspects of our health and wellbeing and you have the right to high quality, trusted healthcare. If you are unhappy with the health care you are receiving, explore your options. It's so important to find a service that provides you with the support that you need. Access the [Better Health Channel](#) for more information about quality sexual and reproductive services and support in Victoria – information is available in 20 different languages. The [Rainbow Network](#) has put together a list of services that specialise in working with LGBTIQ+ communities. For more information about your rights as a patient in Australia, read the [Charter of Healthcare Rights](#)



Reject stereotypes

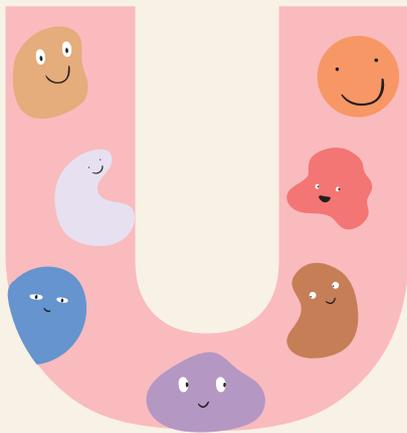
Gender stereotypes reinforce the idea that people should fit into certain roles in society and behave certain ways, depending on their gender. These stereotypes and expectations shape the way that we act, the clothes that we wear, our interests, and the ways that we relate to each other. Gender stereotypes affect everyone, but they are particularly harmful for girls, women and trans people. This is because we live in a society where characteristics associated with men and masculinity are respected more than characteristics associated with women. Stereotypes can lead to inequality and impact our hopes and ambitions and they can stop us from exploring and developing our interests and talents. It is important to challenge and reject gender stereotypes so that we can reach our full potential!



Sex – always, sometimes, never... it's up to you!

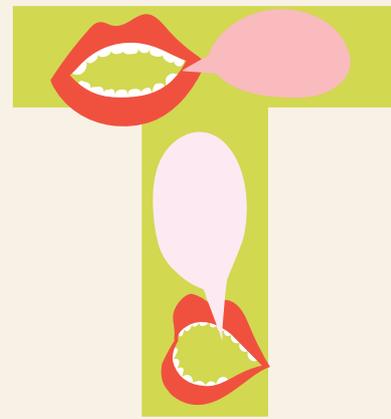
Forget the idea that a 'healthy' sex life means having lots of sex, or a particular kind of sex - there is not one, or 'right' way to be.

Being comfortable with your sexuality does not necessarily mean having sex all the time or being sexually adventurous (although this is absolutely fine). A good sex life can also mean having sex every now and then, sexually exploring yourself, or having no sex at all. What matters is that you have made an informed decision for yourself. This means that you are aware of what you want and that you are able to express this. For some people, the amount of sexual activity they have is a lifestyle choice, but for others, who are asexual, it is a sexual orientation. People who are asexual do not experience sexual attraction, but experience great fulfilment from relationships without sex. [Learn more](http://www.asexuality.org) about the asexual community at www.asexuality.org. Women often experience shame and judgement around their sexual experiences and choices. This is unfair and unhealthy. Everyone has the right to make their own choices about their bodies and their sexual lives - this is vital to consent, trust, respect and equality.



Unique – sexuality is different for everyone

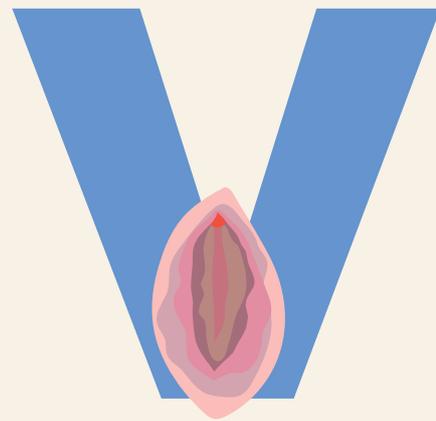
Sexuality is not just the physical act of sex, or who you have sex with, it is also your sexual feelings, thoughts and expression. Sexuality is a deeply personal experience and your sexuality can change throughout your lifetime. Your sexuality is an important part of who you are and how you experience the world. Exploring and understanding your sexuality can be exciting and enjoyable. It can also be tough, or scary, especially if we experience judgment and prejudice from others, or if we have been told that there is something wrong or shameful about our sexuality. [Here is some more information](#) about sexuality and support services that you can access if you have questions about sexuality, need some advice, or think that you have been discriminated against because of your sexuality.



Talk it out. Communicate your wants and needs

Communication is one of the most essential aspects of a healthy relationship and this includes communicating our sexual wants, needs and concerns. This is part of becoming more comfortable with our sexuality and understanding what we want and need in an intimate relationship. This might involve exploring our emotions and how we feel about ourselves, as well as our interactions with others.

Understanding ourselves, our partners and communicating well supports us to have satisfying relationships, in which we feel valued, respected and safe. Have conversations with your partners, share what you enjoy about your relationship, as well as things that you want and need, or are worried about. Communication is a two-way street, so listen to each other and keep talking!



Vulva or vagina? Know your bits

Vag, muff, beaver, lady garden... The female genitals have been labelled all sorts of names over the years. Although these names can seem funny and harmless, only using these terms and never using the proper terminology can have a negative impact on the way people perceive their body. Not talking about, or not properly naming parts of our body can give the impression that our parts are something to be shameful of, or are rude and unmentionable. Vulvas and vaginas are none of these things, they are wonderful and worth getting to know. Also, they are not exactly uncommon, so we shouldn't feel uncomfortable talking about them, or calling them what they are. Know your bits, you can start right here! Do you know the difference between a vulva and vagina? Watch [this video](#) from Planned Parenthood to find out and visit the [Labia Library](#) to see just how unique everyone is.



Want to know more? Visit whwest.org.au

There is a lot of information out there and it's important that you are accessing reliable and accurate information that will help you.

Visit www.whwest.org.au for resources and links to some great information on how and where to access supports and services, should you or someone you know ever need it.

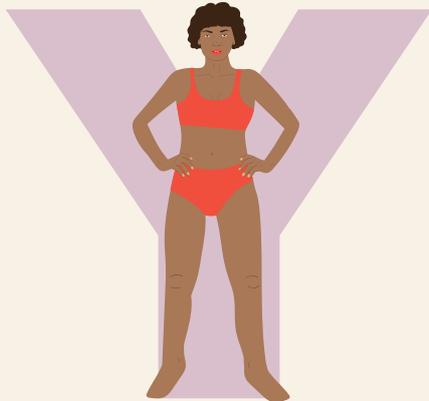


xoxo - sext with respect

A sext is a sexual message. It can be just text, or might include photos, videos or sound. Sharing this material is called sexting.

If done with consent and respect, sexting can be a fun and positive activity. However, you need to remember that when someone sends you a sext, they are putting their trust in you. It is important to respect that trust. The message or image is for you and should not be shared without their consent. It is against the law to share images without consent and it is also against the law to send or receive sexts from a person under 18 years old. For more information about sexting and the law, visit

[Sex and the Law](#)



Your body, your choice

You have the right to make decisions about anything that impacts your body, without pressure from others. This includes decisions about your appearance, menstrual products, sex, contraception, hormone therapy, pregnancy and abortion. Your body is your own - you have the right to choose how you express yourself and how you interact with others. It is also your right to make informed choices about your health and wellbeing. It's your body, so it's your choice.



Zero tolerance for sexual violence

Sexual violence refers to being forced, pressured or misled into engaging in sexual activity when a person has not given consent or when they are unable to give consent. A person cannot provide consent if they are so influenced by drugs or alcohol that they can't make coherent decisions. They also can't make decisions when asleep or unconscious (this one seems obvious but unfortunately, it's a message that needs to be repeated). Sexual violence does not have to be physical, it also includes emotional pressure, harassment or sharing sexual images without consent. It does not matter if you are in a relationship with the person, or if they are a stranger; it is never okay for someone to pressure you into doing something you don't want to do. Read about [important information regarding sex and the law here](#). If you or a friend need support, please visit the Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault at www.casa.org.au. Their website contains useful information and helpful contacts.



Women's Health West acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, the people of the Kulin nation, and we pay our respects to Elders and community members past and present.

We express solidarity with the ongoing struggle for land rights, self-determination, sovereignty and the recognition of past injustices.

We express our hope for reconciliation and justice.