

Personal Lubricants

How to choose the right one for me

Using a personal lubricant can be helpful for many people and for different reasons. A wide variety of lubricants is commercially available, but it can be hard to know which one to buy. Studies have shown some are safer than others. Learn more about how to find a lubricant that works well for you.

How do lubricants (lubes) help?

Every person's body is unique. Our bodies produce natural lubrication but the amount varies over time. People experience a decrease in lubrication at different points in life due to changing hormones:

- During breastfeeding, the years leading up to menopause and throughout menopause
- With use of certain types of birth control and medications for allergies, cancer, depression and other conditions
- After having a hysterectomy or radiation treatment

Aging and the loss of estrogen can cause genital tissue to become dryer and thinner. Sexual intercourse, use of medical rehabilitation devices or certain physical therapy exercises often become uncomfortable or even painful. Using a personal lubricant helps relieve the discomfort and pain by reducing the friction on skin tissue.

Personal lubricants are not all the same

Lubricants can have different characteristics, and certain types are better for some people than others. Many ingredients used in common lubes are known to cause irritation or sensitivity. The lubes we recommend have been found to be safer and healthier.

Lubricants are classified into 3 main types based on their primary ingredient: **water**, **oil** and **silicone**. While less common, a 4th type, **hybrid** lubricants, is also available. Hybrid lubes usually are water-based with a little silicone. Each type has advantages and disadvantages based on desired use and needs.

Water-based lubricants

Water-based lubes are the most commonly used and feel similar to your body's natural lubrication. They usually include more ingredients than other types. These lubes soak into your skin quickly and evaporate (lose moisture).

Advantages

- Widely available
- Least expensive
- Do not usually stain sheets and clothes
- Work well with medical devices, sex toys, condoms and other barrier methods of birth control

Disadvantages

- Dry out quickest (may have to reapply)
- Use preservatives*
- Do not work as well in the shower or bath
- Most likely to irritate skin
- May damage vaginal cells and increase risk of infection*

**Depends on brand*

Oil-based lubricants

Plant oil-based lubes are another option, but avoid petroleum-based oil lubes, such as Vaseline® and baby oil. You can use petroleum-based oils outside your body but not inside.

Advantages

- Moisturize the skin
- Last longer than water-based lubes but not as long as silicone-based lubes
- Can be 100 percent organic with no preservatives

Disadvantages

- Do not work well with most condoms or barrier methods of birth control
- Can stain sheets and clothes
- May irritate vagina
- Take longer to leave your body so may increase vaginal infection

continued

Silicone-based lubricants

Silicone-based lubes have fewer ingredients and a similar consistency in the way they feel and work. Most prelubricated condoms use a silicone lube.

Advantages

- Longest-acting lubricant (does not soak into skin)
- Least irritating—most helpful with sensitive skin
- Typically no preservatives
- Work well with condoms and other barrier methods
- Work well in the shower or bath

Disadvantages

- Most expensive
- Can stain sheets and clothes
- Do not always work well with medical devices or sex toys made from silicone
- Fewer options available
- May feel sticky

How to choose the right lubricant

When choosing a lubricant, consider the qualities of each type along with your needs and your body's sensitivity. It's also helpful to know the pH level of a lubricant. A lube's pH can impact vaginal tissue.

pH

pH is a number scale from 0 to 14 that measures acidity. The vagina has a normal pH range between 3.8 and 4.5, which helps keep a balance of healthy bacteria and yeast. Hormonal changes can cause pH to change. As estrogen levels drop, vaginal pH increases. When pH increases, skin tissue can feel more irritated, and infection can be more common.

Some lubricants have pH levels that are lower or higher than the normal vaginal pH range, and may cause stinging or irritation. Using a lube closer to your body's pH tends to feel more comfortable.

Other ingredients in lubricants

Studies have found certain ingredients commonly found in lubricants can cause problems, sensitivities or are known allergens.

These ingredients include the following:

- **Benzocaine** numbs the skin and can be irritating to tissue.
- **Glycerin** is a sugar alcohol often added to increase slipperiness. Glycerin can promote yeast infections for some people.
- **Nonoxynol 9** and **chlorhexidine gluconate** are used to make lube more sterile but can kill healthy bacteria. They can cause burning and stinging.
- **Parabens** are common synthetic preservatives that can cause skin irritation. Some studies suggest parabens may affect the endocrine system.
- **Petroleum oils** have been found to promote bacterial infections and are easily absorbed, so they take longer for your body to remove.
- **Polyquaternium-15** is used as a preservative but can cause skin irritation. Studies suggest it may also increase risk of infections.
- **Propylene glycol** helps keep lube from drying out but has been linked to bacterial infections. The more exposure, the more sensitivity can increase.
- **Sugars** may be used for flavor but can promote yeast infections. Lubes made with sugars can dry with a sticky or tacky feeling.

Recommended lubricants

Here are a few recommendations based on guidelines in this handout. With the large selection of lubes available, you may also be able to find other safe options. Our Park Nicollet Health and Care Stores carry most of these recommended lubricants:

Water-based

- Slippery Stuff® Gel
- SUTIL™
- Wicked® simply AQUA

Silicone-based

- pjur® ORIGINAL
- überlube

Hybrid (water-based with silicone)

- sliquid Organics® silk

