



## LET'S SLIDE INTO LUBRICANTS

Contributor: Jill McCullough-Squire, BSN, RN, OCN

**Note: This handout is offered as a communication aid for patients and their providers. It is not a substitute for professional examination, diagnosis, or treatment.**

### INTRODUCTION

**Lubricants help make physical intimacy more enjoyable in many ways:**

The use of [lubricants](#) during intimate sexual relations can help with the following:

- Vaginal dryness - related to cancer treatment and or menopause
- Making sex less intimidating
- Pain during sexual intercourse, also known as *dyspareunia*
- Sexual activity and foreplay involving vaginal penetration
- Sexual activity and foreplay involving anal penetration
- Increasing sexual pleasure
- Preventing condom breakage, which will provide better protection against unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- Erectile dysfunction resulting in less firmness needed for penetration

### WHAT TO AVOID IN LUBRICANT INGREDIENTS

Slide your eyes over the ingredients listed to avoid lubricants with any of the following:

- [Chlorhexidine Gluconate](#) is a preservative that can cause burning and irritation
- [Polyquaternium 7, 10, or 15](#) are known to cause irritation
- [Fragrances](#) are usually made with synthetic chemicals, often leading to irritation
- [Glycerin](#) may lead to a yeast infection
- [Propylene glycol](#) is an irritant for many people
- Parabens have conflicting information regarding the safety of this ingredient
- [Spermicides](#) such as [Nonoxynal 9](#), can kill the good bacteria in the vagina and cause irritation.
- ["Cooling" or "Tingling"](#) qualities often cause irritation; [menthol](#) is used for cooling, [capsaicin](#) is used for tingling
- [Flavors](#) can disrupt the vaginal balance and lead to yeast infections
- [Lidocaine](#) causes numbing, which can mask pain, leading to injury or trauma
-

## Avoid Using These Substances As A Lubricant

- [Mineral, petroleum, or baby oil](#) – will stain sheets and clothing and cause the breakdown of latex condoms; these oils may cause irritation or infection of the vagina
- [Animal-based substances](#) – can disrupt the balance of healthy bacteria in the vagina, leading to possible irritation or infection; butter, egg whites, fish oil, and yogurt are some examples

## TAKING THE SLIPPERY MYSTERY OUT OF LUBRICANTS – UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES

It can be intimidating to decide which lubricant is best for your personal sexual intimacy needs. After Cancer is here to slip you into “lubricant literacy”.

### pH Matters for Vaginal or Anal Use

- **Vaginal pH**  
According to the World Health Organization, the normal vaginal pH is between 3.8 and 4.5. Lubricant with a [pH of around 4.5](#) is preferable to maintain the natural vaginal environment. Using a lubricant with a pH that is widely different could lead to a vaginal infection.
- **Rectal PH**  
The **normal rectal pH is about 7.0**, or neutral. A lubricant with a [pH of around 7.0](#) is preferable for anal penetration for less irritation
- The pH should be visible in the labeling of the lubricant.

### Oil, Water, or Silicone Based Lubricant

#### Plant-Based Lubricants

[Plant-based oils](#) and **Vitamin E** – Vitamin E, olive, coconut, hemp, grape seed, and extra virgin olive oils are compatible with the vagina

**Pros** – Long lasting, no artificial ingredients or chemicals, non-irritating, inexpensive, and easily obtained.

**Cons** – oils can stain clothing and sheets, may clog pores, and is not recommended for use with sex toys. There is conflicting information on whether plant-based oils can lead to [tears in condoms](#); there is a lot at stake with a torn condom: a sexually transmitted disease, sexually transmitted infection, unintended exposure to chemotherapy or immunotherapy in semen, or unintended pregnancy. The FDA has not approved the use of plant-based oils for personal lubricants.

#### Water-Based Lubricants

**Pros** – widely available, inexpensive, easy to clean up, non-staining, can be used with all sex toys, safe to use with condoms and dental dams, FDA recommended.

**Cons** – may need to be reapplied as it can dry out and contains the most number of chemicals that can irritate the anal and vaginal skin.

### **Silicone Lubricants**

**Pros** – does not dry out, less irritating than most water-based lube, a lot of silky slip, FDA recommended, safe for condoms, safe for the body since it is not absorbed.

**Cons** – not recommended with sex toys that are not pure silicone, can be harder to clean up since it is not water-soluble and can stain sheets or clothing.

### **SUMMARY**

No matter what lubricant is suitable for you, there is a good chance using lubricant will enhance your enjoyment of intimacy. Lubricant takes away dragging, decreasing the risk for small vaginal or anal tears. It can make penetration, masturbation, or rubbing of sensitive areas more pleasurable.

**To further your knowledge and comfort, After Cancer recommends also reading the following patient handouts:**

Managing Sexual Dysfunction with Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy

Sensate Focus: Touching Exercise to Rediscover Intimacy

Practical Solutions for Low Libido

Ways To Reduce the Impact of Cancer Therapy On the Vulva And Vagina

Penile Rehabilitation with VED

### **Works Cited**

Kennedy, Caitlin E., et al. "Lubricants for the Promotion of Sexual Health and Well-Being: A Systematic Review."

*Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2021, p. 2044198,

doi:10.1080/26410397.2022.2044198.

Cleveland Clinic., "Lubricant Alternatives: What To Use and What To Avoid." *Cleveland Clinic*, 28 Mar. 2023,

<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-can-i-use-instead-of-lube/>.

OB-GYN, Moreland. *Personal Lubricants*. <https://www.morelandobgyn.com/personallubricants>.

University of Texas at Austin. *Lube Dos and Donts*. [https://healthyhorns.utexas.edu/hs\\_lube.html#](https://healthyhorns.utexas.edu/hs_lube.html#).

World Health Organization. *Use and Procurement of Additional Lubricants for Male and Female Condoms*:

*WHO/UNFPA/FHI360 Advisory Note*. WHO: World Health Organization, 2012.