

Lesbian / Gay Health

ACT UP's Contest to Rename the Dental Dam

Condoms have become commonplace in American life, household words if not household items everywhere. But what do you use for safe sex with a woman partner, whether you are a man or another woman? There is another latex safe sex accoutrement out there, the problem is, we don't know what to call it.

Dental dams, six inch by six inch latex squares, are used during dental surgical procedures and women have started using them for safe oral sex. But they are not widely manufactured or distributed and, let's face it, there's not much sexy about dentists' equipment. The Women's Caucus of ACT UP (The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) is sponsoring a contest to rename the dental dam in an effort to promote awareness and use of the things, and in so doing, to also promote the reality of women as sexual beings who enjoy sex but also must protect themselves and their partners from possible transmission of HIV, the virus believed to cause AIDS.

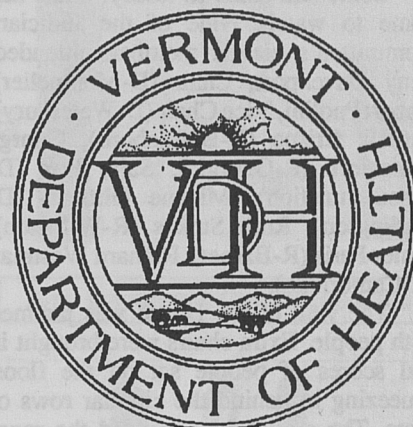
Women's sexuality has remained invisible during the age of AIDS and we are simply told that we have nothing to worry about if we have "normal" sex with one male partner and don't use I.V. drugs. But more than 80% of heterosexual transmission cases in New York City alone are among non-I.V. drug using women. Women are told to use condoms, but not taught how to negotiate safer sex with their partners.

Lesbians are not factored into the equation at all because, according to Dr. Charles Schable of the Centers for Disease Control, "lesbians don't have much sex." But there are at least three documented cases of woman-to-woman transmission and women have three times the number of "unknown" modes of transmission according to the CDC figures. The possibility that HIV can be transmitted through cunnilingus, or going down on a woman, didn't get any attention at all until a man contracted the virus from oral sex with a woman. Clearly HIV is present in menstrual blood and vaginal secretions.

The medical establishment is not in a hurry to recognize women's sexuality, so it's up to women to talk about it and teach ourselves about new behaviors. Also, ACT UP asserts that boxing people into "risk groups" is deceiving and dangerous because it is risk behaviors, not identity, that determine risk. For instance there are lesbians who use I.V. drugs or have had unsafe sex with men.

"The contest is in a fun spirit, but we hope that it can help make women aware of safer sex for them, and having safe sex related to their lives while also promoting sex itself," said Marion Banzhaf, one of the creators of the contest. She added that not enough is known about transmission during oral sex with women to take the risk of barrier-free sex. (Continued on page 14)

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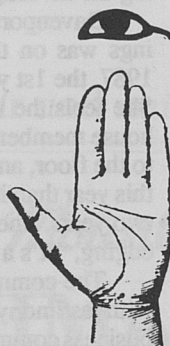
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