

# Health

## AIDS and the Serious Relationship

*(Ed. Note: The following article deals with sexual matters in a explicit and honest manner. Rather than censor what we feel to be important and potentially life-saving educational information, we leave our readers to exercise their own judgment in reading this piece.)*

So it finally happened. After years of looking, failed attempts, love gone wrong, a few (or maybe quite a few) one night stands, you've finally met Mister Right and you're settling down into the Serious Relationship. Yup, this is it; wedding bells are ringing, your friends are buying you toasters, you're hosting dinner parties, and you've got a joint checking account. All you need now is the white picket fence.

And of course, you don't need to bother with condoms and all that safe sex stuff anymore, do you? After all, haven't we been told again and again that the way not to get AIDS/HIV is to "know your partner," and have a "mutually monogamous relationship?"

Many gay men still believe the moralistic messages that intend for us to think that people who have multiple sexual partners, bar pick-ups and sex in public places may get this virus because they do "sleazy" things, or they're "sluts," or whatever other judgmental attitude we have absorbed from the rest of society. "It" might happen to "bad" people, but not to happy newlyweds.

As Ann Landers might say, "Wake up and smell the coffee, guys!" The boys in the bars might go home with lots of people and the rest-stop gang may have oral sex (of questionable safety), but it is in the bedrooms of long-term lovers that most of the intercourse without condoms is going on. Maybe we can tell a relative stranger that they have to wear a condom, but our own lover? No, that just brings up too many issues for some of us to deal with.

How can a couple safely make the decision that their sexual relationship no longer needs to follow safer sex guidelines? What steps can be taken to assure safety? Where does testing fit into that decision-making?

It is important to remember that simply being in a relationship does not prevent HIV infection. If one of the partners has or acquires HIV, the other partner is at risk if they practice unprotected sex.

Yet it is equally important to remind ourselves that HIV does not arise spontane-

ously; it must be introduced from an external source. If two people with no previous history of risk enter a relationship, by definition everything they do is risk free (at least as long as they remain monogamous). But face it, most of us are not virgins likely to meet another virgin and begin a lifelong relationship. Still, for many people, the prospect of years and years of possibly unnecessary condom use with their one and only is simply too much to bear.

### A few guidelines:

First, is this really a serious relationship? It is easy to fall into a pattern of serial monogamy, spending a few months with one partner, breaking up, and then starting up a new relationship. Unprotected sex in this context is not safer sex; the changing of partners allows too many opportunities for infection to happen. Ask yourself how long you've been together. What kind of pattern do you have from your previous relationships? What period of time does it take being together before you consider it a serious relationship?

If you've decided that yes, this is the real thing, the next question to ask is "Are we really going to be monogamous?" This is not a question you can consider lightly. Talk it over together and be honest with each other. Have you been monogamous in past relationships, or do you tend, even rarely, to play around? If you are not planning monogamy, are you both comfortable with the safer sex limits outside of the relationship? Is it okay with you if he engages in mutual masturbation with someone else, but not condom-protected intercourse? Where do you each draw the line, and are you each willing to inform the other if that line gets crossed?

When you talk about these issues, tough questions of trust are bound to come up. Ask yourself: If I slip up, am I really willing to tell him, and would he tell me the same? Or would either of you be too afraid of the effect it would have on the relationship to risk that degree of honesty? Talk about it now, but also make a point of renewing the agreement as the relationship goes on. The stakes are too high in this to allow someone to be put at risk when he thinks he should be safe. If you have agreed to monogamy, you have an obligation to inform your partner that the circumstances have changed.

After you've decided that the relation-

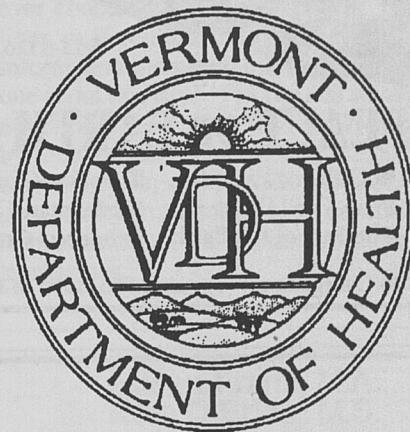
ship is serious and that you have an agreement on sex outside of the relationship, the next issue is knowing each other's HIV status.

Obviously, unprotected sex is only safe if both partners are uninfected. Deciding to learn each other's HIV status is not, however, something to be taken lightly.

Ask each other about your history: Does either of you have a history of unprotected sex or needle-sharing prior to your relationship? If so—even once—you have to assume that one of you could be infected and continue practicing safer sex.

Invariably, the question of getting tested will come up. It is difficult, but many *(continued on next page)*

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