

Health

Safer Sex: The Women's Perspective

(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.)

by Montagne

Many of us have heard the mysterious rumblings concerning lesbian safer sex practices and find ourselves wondering just how the lesbian community is affected by HIV. Should lesbians be practicing safer sex or do they not have to worry about becoming infected with HIV?

Basically, the lesbian community has a low national incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). This is one way AIDS experts can gauge the potential spread of HIV, since the same sexual practices are required to transmit HIV and other STDs. The conclusion reached by most health officials is that the risk of HIV transmission between women is low because of the lower incidence of STD transmission in the lesbian community. Also, the amount of cervical secretions transferred between women is much lower than the amount of semen transmitted during intercourse involving men. Finally, since relatively few lesbians have become infected with HIV at this point in time, the odds are lower that a lesbian will come in contact with another woman who is infected.

This doesn't mean that lesbians are somehow immune to becoming infected with HIV. Some lesbians have been known to share needles; others may have had sex with men who have been infected; still others have had transfusions or been artificially inseminated prior to the testing of the blood supply or testing at sperm banks.

Whether you follow safer sex guidelines or not, there is still some level of risk concerning HIV transmission, and total abstinence won't help if you are sharing needles. It is up to the individual to decide how much risk she is willing to take in relation to her own lifestyle and level of personal comfort.

For lesbians, if you decide to follow safer sex guidelines, do it and don't feel ashamed about it. If you don't follow these guidelines, then you are conceivably placing yourself and your partner at some risk, however low. At this time, we can only assume that you would be placing yourself

and your partner at the same risk level you yourself have been at for STDs – if you aren't sharing needles. Keep in mind that risk comes from what you do, not how you may label or group yourself. Just identifying yourself as a lesbian doesn't provide safety.

In any case, it is just common sense to learn the sexual history of your partner prior to engaging in sexual activity. If you practice safer sex, then you don't have to rely on memory or the word of your partner(s).

Some tips concerning safer sex practices for lesbians:

Gloves: If you are having sex with a woman during her period, or if you like rough finger play, the use of gloves or finger cots is advisable. Finger cots are like mini-condoms for your fingers. Don't ever transfer fluids from one woman's body to the other's. Gloves (surgical gloves are best) can prevent transmission through cuts or rashes on your hands.

Dental Dams: During oral sex, be sure to use a dental dam, especially if the partner receiving the oral stimulation is having her period. Dental dams are pieces of latex about five inches square and come in varying thicknesses and flavors. Condoms can be used and are cheaper; non-lubricated condoms can be cut up the side after the tip has been cut off.

Be sure to put some lubricant on the side next to your partner to avoid causing burns from vigorous use. The lubricant should be water-based; KY gel is the most commonly used. Don't use shortening or hand cream. Also be sure to take a crayon and mark your side of the condom or dental dam. A marker will go through the latex and makes it difficult to tell whose side is whose. An X made by a crayon can also be felt for in the dark so you won't have to turn the light on and off.

Finally, keep a bowl of bleach and water handy and drop used dental dams or condoms into it after each use.

These can be used again later after being cleaned with one part bleach to ten parts water. It's best to use a cleaned dam or condom each time – and not reuse the one you used five or ten minutes ago. There is less chance of a mix-up on whose side is whose.

Condoms: Aside from using a non-lubricated condom for oral play, condoms should be used for vibrators and other toys if they are shared. Put a new condom on the toy each time it is used and throw the used ones away.

Other handy hints:

Wash your sex toys after each use.

Always wash dental dams before you first use them because they have a talc on them that may irritate sensitive body parts. Wash surgical gloves and finger cots prior to use as well.

Rinse cleaned condoms, dental dams, gloves, and finger cots thoroughly after they have been cleaned with the bleach solution. Bleach that isn't washed off can cause damage to body parts and it tastes terrible.

Most importantly, remember to have fun with all this and also remember that it takes time to get used to these safer sex practices.

If you are feeling more confused than ever concerning lesbian safer sex guidelines, or if you just want to find out more information and would like to talk to someone about this issue, you can call someone at Vermont C.A.R.E.S. (863-2437) or drop by their office. Vermont C.A.R.E.S. has several women who provide free peer support, education, and counseling concerning lesbian safer sex guidelines and other related issues.

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