

It Is Not Safe to Take Off the Condoms Yet

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The origins of dermatology included identification of venereal diseases. In the 21st century, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) remains the most challenging venereal disease, as the silent carriage allows for easy transmission. Patients with HIV often present with conditions affecting the skin, such as squamous cell carcinoma of the anal canal as described by Zaleski and Turiansky¹ in this month's issue of *Cutis*[®], and seek treatment from dermatologists. Although homosexual transmission of HIV is still the leading cause in the United States and heterosexual transmission of HIV is not yet fully epidemic in the United States,² there are lessons to be learned from Africa where heterosexual transmission is the primary source of illness. In the United States, universal HIV screening is being encouraged, primarily because asymptomatic individuals and individuals with no apparent risk factors for HIV are detected by universal screening. These individuals might otherwise transmit infection unwittingly, particularly in the early and late stages of infection.^{3,4}

In the initial stages of the HIV epidemic in the United States, homosexual sexual activity and intravenous drug usage were leading causes of transmission, but HIV is not discriminatory. It is not uncommon to see heterosexual transmission, which is the leading source of transmission in Africa. Patients have shared stories of how they contracted HIV, tales with themes of universal appeal involving romance, love won and lost, flattery, and ultimately betrayal of these relationships by the transmission of HIV during the course of unprotected sexual encounters. The stories all have a common element: the absence of latex condom usage. Much of the sexual transmission of HIV that occurs could be prevented with careful latex condom usage, which has been supported by in vitro studies and continues to remain the primary form of protection against HIV and transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).⁵ In fact,

one wonders why anyone carries on a heterosexual relationship without condoms in this day and age.

People in the United States are getting sloppy about condom usage. The incidence of STDs is on the rise in New York City, including increases in chlamydia among females aged 15 to 24 years and syphilis in men who have sex with men; these increases are reflected nationwide.⁶ Increased transmission of STDs is generally attributed to unsafe sexual practices. Sexually transmitted diseases such as human papillomavirus or herpes simplex virus infections potentiate the risk for acquisition of HIV.^{7,8} It is of paramount importance that physicians encourage their patients to practice safe sexual practices using latex condoms, particularly patients with STDs. The message was started in the 1980s⁵ and remains true today—latex condoms save lives.

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