Does Reality Bite?

Casey Davidson (and her boyfriend) take the female condom out for a test drive.

October 1, 1994 By Casey Davidson

I wouldn't advise the new Reality condom for women for the kind of sex that involves more than 15 positions or hanging from the chandelier. Still, Reality doesn't bite at all. It's pretty groovy and comfortable, and makes a nice alternative to latex condoms in the age of safer sex. But what is a female condom? The lowdown:

What does Reality look like?
Kind of like a diaphragm with a tail. The condom has two rings, one on each end. Between the rings is a milky white sheath of polyurethane rather than the standard latex of a male condom. The condom conducts heat better than its male counterpart and feels thinner, thus less obtrusive -- if anything seven inches long and man-made resting inside you can be unobtrusive.

How does Reality feel?
My boyfriend said he couldn't feel a thing, and once it was in, neither could I. The condom should be changed after each sex act, gets twisted very easily, makes strange noises and dries out. A liberale use of lubricant is advised. Walking around with it on feels like having an extra set of lips, if you can even imagine.

Is Reality for everyone?
It's an equal opportunity device. The male condom used to be the only birth control method also effective at stopping HIV. For the first time, the female condom shifts control of disease prevention to the woman. We've heard there are gay men using it as well. The FDA sniffed at the topic: "We wouldn't have any opinion on male use of the condom one way or the other." The marketer, Female Health Company of Wisconsin Pharmacal, wasn't even surprised. "We support safer sex, period. Anyone who's having sex should do it safely and smartly, and here's one more option." Reality does work for men; A recent study conducted at Chicago's Howard Brown Health Center showed the condom is sturdy enough for the rigors of anal sex.

Why does Reality make people squirm?
I've found it made the straight men in my office nervous when I flung it around. They'd stop by to say, "What's that?" and then recoil in horror. Maybe it was the staple in the sample condom I was sent, I don't know. At any rate, birth control is never pretty and this device, the Reality condom, has more in common with a water balloon than a bustier. The directions for the female condom are

long, complicated and just plain God-awful scary. One question, for example, is, “What do I do if the penis is inserted outside the pouch?” (a pretty easy thing to do, mind you). The answer: “STOP. Remove the penis....” Yeah, right.

How much does Reality cost?

It’s not inexpensive at $8.99 for a package of three and the company advises you to use one to try on and practice with. I found that after being in a monogamous relationship for three years, I didn’t need to practice. It’s a lot like using a diaphragm: Just when you think it’s in or near the right place, it springs right out of your hand. And, of course, you sit there throughout the entire sex act worrying if it’s in the right place.

What are Reality’s drawbacks?

Well, it’s a fright to see that the failure rate is about 26 percent a year among women who don’t know how to use it consistently and correctly, according to the FDA (in the same range as the failure rate for male condoms). With religious use of Reality -- well, three or more times -- the failure rate falls to five percent. If Reality is in, it’s not very conducive to oral sex because it’s not unlike Saturn sticking out between your legs. Vigorous movement is limited, in the same way as a latex condom. On the other hand, my boyfriend, who fancies himself to be on the cutting edge, is telling friends how cool it is.

In sum, Reality’s female condom is no more obtrusive, inconvenient or uncomfortable than the common diaphragm. Just make sure that you, too, have a cutting-edge boyfriend.

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