A Slippery Slope?

Sexual lubricants, once believed to protect against sexually transmitted infections, may actually increase risk.

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Using lubrication with condoms for anal intercourse to help protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) has been a long-standing practice of prevention because lubricants can prevent abrasions, which can increase the chance of STI transmission.

However, a study reported at the Microbicides: 2010 conference in late May challenged that theory. Research conducted by Pamina Gorbach, DrPH, and others at the University of California at Los Angeles, showed that people who recently used lube, either with or without condoms, during anal sex were more likely to contractSTIs than those who didn't.

This is because regular lube use can damage the epithelium, the thin layer of cells lining the anal cavity, Gorbach explains. And this, in turn, makes people more vulnerable to STIs.

In the study involving 300 women and men who had anal sex, those who had used lubes in their last receptive anal sex encounter had more cases of the bacterial infections chlamydia and gonorrhea than those in the no-lube group. Gorbach says condom use was uniform across the groups. (If used properly, condoms can provide excellent protection against HIV/AIDS, but they do not protect against certain STIs.)

A related study also reviewed at the conference evaluated the specific lubes. According to study author Charlene Dezzutti, PhD, of the University of Pittsburgh, water-based Pré and condom-compatible silicone Wet Platinum seemed to cause less epithelial erosion than four others analyzed (Astroglide, Elbow Grease, ID Glide and K-Y Jelly). Microbicide activist Anna Forbes urges caution before forgoing lubrication. "Don't drop lubes," she says. "That can increase the risk of trauma and therefore of HIV."

The bottom line? Get tested for STIs, get treated if necessary, and play it as safe as you possibly can.

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