Soap Dish

A simple solution for everyday HIV

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Clean up your act: A UCSF study shows that soap and water kills HIV. Researcher Jay Levy, MD, went back to the basics to find a sterilizer while recently developing an HIV-defiant diaphragm. “Fellow researchers doubted my soap-and-water hypothesis, so I said, ‘We’ll prove it.’”

Levy and students Jonathan Li and Elizabeth Mack crafted an experiment exposing HIV to good ol’ Ivory soap. The trio combined the lather with varying amounts of HIV-enhanced vaginal and seminal fluids in vitro. The soap consistently trumped the virus. “We then went on to try it with a variety of soaps—bar, liquid, antibacterial, non-antibacterial—it works with any soap,” said Levy, who hopes the study helps developing countries, where sterilizing solutions may be scarce.

But should you douche with soap and water after unprotected sex or if a condom breaks? “It’s probably better than nothing in an emergency. Only I wouldn’t recommend it as a [regular] method,” says Levy, adding that repeated exposure to soap and water can weaken vaginal and rectal defenses. “In the end, it can make you more susceptible to infection.”

Anna Forbes of the Global Campaign for Microbicides is even more cautious. “In light of Nonoxynol-9, we know that detergent products can possibly damage mucous membranes,” she says. In the meantime, she’s all for giving sex toys the big scrub.

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