Why Condoms Are Sexy, Even in Porn

October 15, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

Two days ago, another adult film actor tested positive for HIV at the Adult Industry Medical Healthcare Foundation (AIM). Since 2004, 25 cases of HIV have been diagnosed at AIM; at least 8 of those cases were in adult film actors, according to Dr. Robert Kim-Farley, the communicable disease director at the Los Angeles County Public Health Department.

In response, all over California, pornographers like Vivid Entertainment Group, Hustler Video, Pink Visual Productions, Digital Playground, Jennaration X Studios, Girlfriends Films, Wicked Pictures and Kick Ass Pictures shut down production--or claimed they would.

Steven Hirsch, the founder of Vivid was quoted as saying, “Adult entertainment companies act responsibly, and so no one wants to see another person test positive if there’s anything they can do to stop it.” He added, “We immediately shut down production and said ’Let’s get the facts and evaluate them before we move forward’.”

Okay Steven, let me be the first to tell you. There is something you can do to stop it. You can only shoot films in which actors use condoms. The fact (that you do not need to wait for) is even if you regularly test your actors, there’s the possibility someone could have contracted HIV and be in the “window period” between infection and when the body mounts its immune response and produces the antibodies to HIV necessary for a positive HIV test result. So, even regular testing is not 100% insurance against HIV infection. Which is why condoms should always be used by sexual partners of unknown HIV status.

I suppose if actors could be paired in monogamous couplings (or three- or four- somes) once they had all definitely been identified as HIV negative and if they could stay faithful to their partner or crew, you could toss the latex. But since the very backbone of the adult film industry is variety and spice and since the actors have lives off screen too, this seems highly impractical.

There are tests that can detect the presence of HIV much sooner than the body might produce antibodies. But even if a person was tested daily, it doesn’t mean they couldn’t have been exposed to and contracted HIV at any given point in between tests.

I always get flooded with questions about HIV testing. How many are needed? At what interval? When is it safe to have unsafe sex? (Yes, someone actually asked that.) There are so many variables around HIV testing that the safest way to be safe is to use a condom. Consider this: if someone tells you they’ve been tested, do you believe them...both about whether they got the test and the result?

The bottom line is everyone who is sexually active should be tested for HIV and all other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) every six months (especially because having other STIs can greatly increase

your risk of contracting HIV not to mention that we all should know what we have so we don't spread diseases unwittingly). Ideally, HIV testing should be seen as a monitor of your own health, not your license to bareback.

Now, I know there are a lot of people out there who feel differently. I will reiterate that in a monogamous relationship in which people are faithful and there's no question that they're HIV-negative, condoms may not be necessary (though again, they protect against other STIs and unintended pregnancy and given infidelity rates, monogamy is never a sure thing). Some couples or partners in which both are HIV-positive choose to bareback. Of course it's up to every person to decide what risks he or she is willing to take. And given antiretroviral treatment's potential to lower viral loads to undetectable levels (which can reduce the chances for HIV transmission), people living with HIV today and their partners may have more options. The World Health Organization released a controversial statement in 2008 that alleged that people who have an undetectable viral load for more than six months and who have no other sexually transmitted infections may be considered less sexually infectious (read the whole statement and story in POZ here). A random tangent but an important one...as we struggle to encourage people who need to connect to care, why have we never used the "treatment and perfect compliance could lead to safer barebacking" argument as incentive? Hmmm...perhaps a little edgy as an approach to public health, but if an undetectable viral load can lead to safer unprotected sex, that's a good thing. And for those who still use condoms, it's a double whammy of protection. Condom + undetectable viral load = even safer sex. And safer sex is sexier sex because there is nothing sexy about risking someone else's life.

Kim-Farley said, "We strongly feel that condom use should be required in this industry; just like a construction worker wouldn't go into a construction site without a hard hat, an adult industry performer should not be having sexual acts unprotected without a condom."

The problem though is that just as no one really wants to don a big, plastic, dorky yellow hat, few men want to don a (hopefully) big, latex, dorky, flesh-toned condom.

But since we can't change the medical facts around condoms' ability to save lives, I say, let's change the way we see condoms. Rather than viewing them as a necessary evil, or something to avoid, let's embrace them and turn the whole equation around so whipping one out is not a buzz kill but rather, a turn on. (And for the record, women who have condoms handy are not "hoes;" they are responsible, smart, empowered, selfless women who plan on having sex again one day without risking someone else's--or their own--lives. The double standard around being prepared for sex kills. So men, do yourselves a favor and stop busting on us for being prepared. And be glad we've shelled out the dough and bothered to go to CVS and faced the funny looks from the people at checkout on your behalf.)

The thought of being icked out by condoms reminds me of when I was wandering around my first International AIDS Conference in Toronto in 2006 and happened upon a group of pretty French women standing in the Global Village (the part of the conference dedicated to the HIV/AIDS community) around a piece of plywood covered with vertical, multicolored rubber phalluses (phalli?).

I had to stop.

I peered gingerly over one woman's shoulder.

<<Qu-est-ce que c'est?>> I asked in one of the few French phrases I'd remembered from high school.

She looked at me as if I was crazy. Did a small forest of rubber, erect penises (penii?) nailed to a piece of, well, wood, need describing?

Yes it did. I tried again.

“What are those for?”

Again, crinkled noses and looks of disbelief.

“I mean, I know what they’re FOR but why so many and why nailed to that piece of wood?” I persisted.

One woman whipped out an egg timer and a little wicker basket full of an assortment of condoms.

“You have five minutes to get ten condoms on ten penises. It’s a game. They must fit properly,” she said. “And they must not be inside-out.” “ Commencer!” she commanded.

And with the plastic timer ticking away, I ripped open the first condom package.

Or, I tried to.

Have you ever opened a bag of smoked almonds? The packaging is similar to that of condoms. Slippery, tough and hermetically sealed. I raised the packet to my mouth.

“Be careful!” she cautioned. “It doesn’t count if it has holes in it.”

I nodded as I shredded the foil with my teeth. I pulled the little latex frisbee out of its pouch and pondered, my eyes roaming over the different sex toys. It was hard to gauge the girth of the condom just by eying it. I picked up the torn package. It said: Magnum.

Just as women’s fashion offers a shrinking dress size in direct and inverse proportion to its price tag, the labeling of condom sizes is oft inflated. If it’s gold and claims to be big, you can bet your booty that it’s premium priced, normal size. When companies start throwing the “XL” around…that’s when things start changing.

I chose a medium size member and unfurled the latex loop to the base. One down, 9 to go, 3.5 minutes and counting.

I frantically ripped and unrolled, re-rolled and re-unrolled until I’d laid rubber on nine more faux penises.

Ding! My time was up.

“Veeeery good,” she said.

One French woman slid her finger between a condom and demo-penis and said, “This one’s a lee-tle loose.”

I shrugged and smiled.

“Okay,” she challenged. “Now you try this.”

She handed me a wooden box with a slit in one side. The opening was wide enough to slide my fingers in up to my last knuckles.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

She handed me a condom and motioned for me to stick my hands back in the box.

The tips of my fingers brushed against another erect rubber penis.

My eyebrows folded inward, quizzically.

“Well, most people put them on in the dark,” she said in a very exasperated tone.

“Ah ha!” I said.

I pulled the condom out and sensed the less slippery side with my fingertips and slid the condom over the phallus.

Finished, I handed her the box proudly.

She stuck her French manicured nails into the box, whipped off the condom and turned her back on the box. She nodded to one of her assistants who handed her a fresh prophylactic. With eerie superhuman speed, and no tearing of the foil package with her teeth, consideration or slow rolling, she extracted the latex ring from its glistening candy-like wrapper and whammo! flashed her hands behind her back, slipped them into the box, down over the penis, whipped them back out and brushed them together smugly.

She stared at me, deadly serious. “This problem with ED? This need for Viagra? It’s all because people don’t know how to put a condom on fast. Without thinking about it. Sexily!”

And in that moment, she gave me license to reconsider that the awkward fumbling and bumbling so many people complain is an inevitable part of condom application was not inevitable at all but rather, the result of lack of practice, finesse and confidence.

Ya gotta love the French.

But they are not the only ones who excel in making safe sex sexy.

Some friends of mine who teach safety and prevention for sex workers have shared the principles of “cheeking” with me. I have yet to attempt the technique, but according to them, there are men and women skilled at placing a condom inside their cheek and during fellatio, rolling it with lips and tongue over a penis so their partner barely even notice it’s on. It’s a very effective technique for people (like sex workers) who are not in positions of power and who could not openly negotiate for condom use. I don’t like thinking that there are so many people in this position and we need to help sex workers and others at risk in sexual equations stay safe. But it also teaches a very valuable lesson: wielded well, condoms don’t have to stop the action or undermine pleasure.

Now I’m just sayin’, if any group of people could learn to handle and apply condoms with flourish and flair, it’s adult film actors. And, given the massive consumption of porn by people of all ages, nations and walks of life, porn is arguably the best place in the world to teach people how to make safe sex sexy. Can you imagine if we could shift the paradigm and use porn to teach? And, at the same time, keep adult film actors and their real life partners safe?

I think it’s high time everyone stopped pretending they didn’t watch porn and agreed to pay for porn involving condoms.

It is perhaps the ultimate irony that legions of people pay a premium around the world to sit safely in front of their TVs or computers and pleasure themselves to the site of others risking their health and lives.

As a woman living with HIV, condoms are bound to be part and parcel of my sex life. If I were to choose not to use them, I would risk contracting other diseases that could complicate, and perhaps undermine, my attempts to survive HIV. I would put someone else possibly at risk for contracting HIV. And I could risk being put in jail, as more and more people are being tried and prosecuted for allegedly potentially exposing someone else to HIV (even if that someone else is a consensual sex partner). Given all that, condom use is an absolute must, 100% of the time. And so it was encouraging to consider that an STI-prevention tool could be rendered sexy through bravado, technique and a good imagination.

My French friends showed how skill when putting on a lifesaving device could transform a moment that could lead to flacidity (I think I just made that word up!) into a thing of beauty and arousal.

Try it yourself. Let your fingers slowly roll the condom millimeter by electric millimeter over each singing inch of flesh, making eye contact and smiling and talking to your partner.

You may be surprised that what goes down can dictate what comes up,

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/why-condoms-are-sexy