

Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian

# ON OUR BACKS

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# LET'S GO SAFE

## LESBIANS, AIDS, AND SAFE SEX

Ann brushed her lips softly across Marie's, then down her arched neck, to land for a moment on one eager nipple. As Ann's hands stroked her lover's sweating spine, then cradled her ass in strong fingers, Marie moaned:

"Wait, love, I'll get the dam!" Pulling a square of dark latex out of the cardboard box on the nightstand, she arranged it between her trembling thighs and guided Ann's face down across her belly....

"Please! Inside me!" Marie whispered.

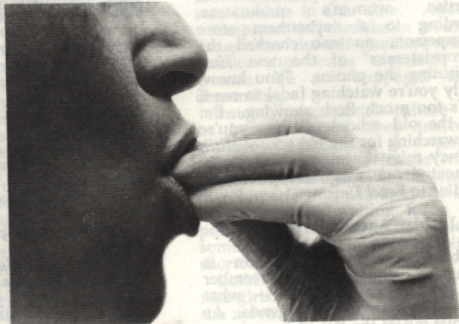
"Just a minute, sweetheart," Ann whispered, as she slipped the fingers into a plastic glove before probing that sweet wetness....

Slipped her fingers into a what?

Is this science fiction?

Or is it the only way for Marie to protect Ann from the AIDS virus which she could be carrying?

During the last year or two, several AIDS organizations and lesbian publications have devised some safe sex guidelines for lesbians who may run the risk of being infected with the AIDS virus. Many lesbians have viewed these guidelines with some confusion,



Everything you need to know about AIDS prevention

### ARTICLE

Emily Kahn

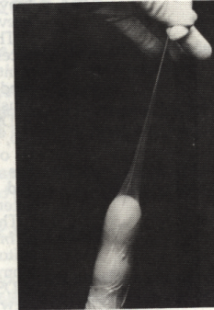
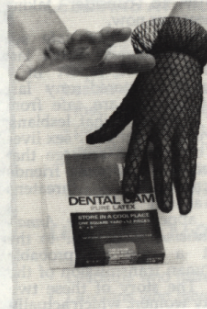
### PHOTOS

H.L. Cottrell

### ILLUSTRATIONS

Sarita Johnson

# SEX SHOPPING!



## Rubber Dental Dams

A hospital supply store can give you the names and telephone numbers of local dental suppliers, who may not be listed in the Yellow Pages. Dental dams are about \$6.50 for a box of 36 and come in various sizes (such as 6 x 6 inches) and weights (try the light or medium). Check out the flavors, too: chocolate, vanilla, and mint!

You can order rubber dams at two for 75 cents from the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco. Write to them in care of:

Exodus Trust, 1523 Franklin Street, San Francisco, CA 94110, or call them at (415) 928-1133.

Exodus Trust also carries a complete Safe Sex Kit, including ten condoms, two water-based spermicidal lubricants, two pairs of latex gloves, and two rubber dams, for \$19.95 plus \$2.50 for shipping and handling. This kit comes with a booklet telling you how to enjoy it all.

## How-To

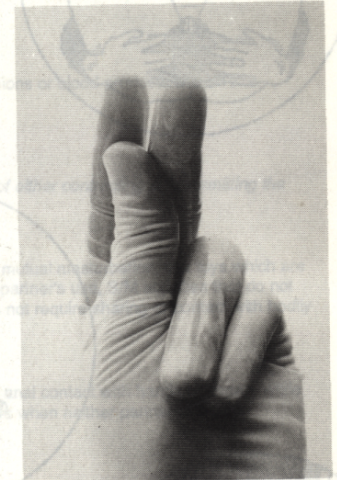
A Complete Guide to Safe Sex, is available at \$6.95 from Exodus Trust, 1523 Franklin Street, San Francisco, CA 94114.

Most sex toy stores, carry safe sex supplies, and a growing number of gay/lesbian book and gift shops have safe sex accessories as well. Call up your local gay establishment and ask if you can purchase safe sex supplies. If they say they don't carry anything for safe sex, ask them: *What are you waiting for?*

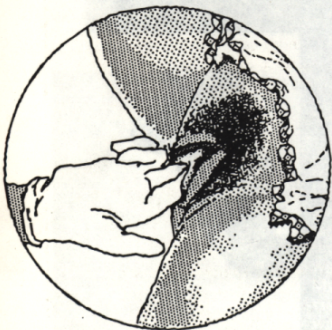
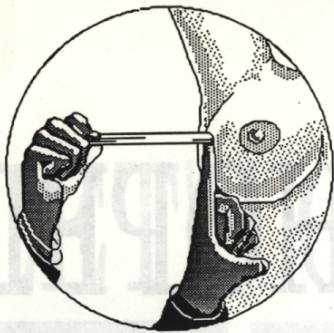
## Finger Cots and Surgical Gloves

Gloves and cots are available at most pharmacies and discount drugstores. Finger cots are a low 19 cents each; surgical gloves (the non-sterile variety, which are the kind used by doctors for pelvic examinations, are suitable) cost about \$6.25 for a box of fifty. Gloves come in small through extra large sizes.

Hospital supply stores (which are listed in the Yellow Pages) carry both finger cots, at about \$2.25 for twelve dozen, and surgical gloves, at about \$10.00 for 100.







because they have been told they are in a low risk group.

Sadly, the times have changed. AIDS is no longer considered a male homosexual disease, and the mass media is encouraging everyone to practice prevention. That includes lesbians, especially those who have not been celibate or in monogamous relationships since 1979. Granted, few lesbians to date have contracted the AIDS virus, but considering the long incubation period for the disease, it may be wise to consider taking preventive measures now.

The concept of lesbian safe sex received an unwelcomed boost last winter, when a brief report in a medical journal shattered any last illusions that lesbians are safe from AIDS. Now it appears that lesbians, too, may have to censor their sex lives in order to escape the scourge that has decimated our gay male friends and increasingly threatens heterosexuals as well.

The report appeared in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, in a letter to the editor about a case of probable woman-to-woman transmission of the AIDS virus. The story of these two New York City women, which actually began back in 1982, was first described informally about two years ago in the *Village Voice*.

In the *Voice* article, writer Peg Byron interviewed the surviving lover, "Cathy." Cathy's lover, "Jill," a former intravenous drug user, had recently died of AIDS. Now Cathy was infected with the AIDS virus, and beginning to experience some of the early symptoms of AIDS.

Cathy was not a drug user, and reported no other obvious risk factors for AIDS. Although she had had sex with a couple of men in the years before her symptoms began, one of these men tested negative; the other did not want to be tested, but denied that he had any of the usual AIDS risk factors or symptoms.

Yes, this guy's refusal to be tested might be a bit suspicious. But I'm afraid there's no strong reason to hope that Cathy got AIDS from him and not from Jill. The evidence for lesbian transmission in this case is too convincing.

Cathy's first fevers and swollen glands appeared about six weeks after the beginning of her relationship with Jill. At that time, Jill had already been to the doctor with unexplained weight loss and swollen glands. Later, Jill was to develop Kaposi's sarcoma, a cancer associated with AIDS.

Although it's true that AIDS generally has a longer incubation period — several years, rather than several weeks — many people do experience an initial "acute infection"

(continued on page 42)

## SAFE SEX GUIDELINES FOR LESBIANS

*Most lesbians do not have a high risk of contracting or transmitting the AIDS virus at this time. But for lesbians who fit into one of the "high risk" groups, practicing safe sex is a must to prevent further exposure. For lesbians who are at low risk, learning and practicing safe sex is the healthiest way to stay sexually active and prevent AIDS from growing in our community.*

### LESBIANS AT HIGH RISK FOR AIDS

- Lesbians who share needles or any other paraphernalia (spoons, works, syringes) when using IV drugs. *This is the single most important risk category for lesbians.*
- Lesbians who have had sexual contact with:
  - men who have been actively gay or bisexual since 1979,
  - people of either sex whose sexual histories are unknown,
  - people who use IV drugs,
  - people who are hemophilic, or who have received blood transfusions between 1979 and 1985.
- Lesbians who have received blood transfusions or blood products between 1979 and 1985.

### LESBIANS AT LOW RISK FOR AIDS

- Lesbians who have been monogamous with a partner since 1979.
- Lesbians who have been celibate and have received no blood transfusions or blood products since 1979.
- Lesbians whose sexual partners have not been at risk since 1979.

*AIDS experts are advising lesbians who believe that they run the risk of either contracting or transmitting the disease to follow safe sex guidelines:*

### SAFE LESBIAN SEX

Massage, tribadism (body to body rubbing), social kissing, voyeurism, mutual masturbation, sex toys which are protected with condoms, or cleaned and dried thoroughly between each partner's use, S/M activities that do not involve exchanging bodily fluids, and virtually any other activity that does not require sharing or contact with bodily fluids.

### LOW RISK LESBIAN SEX

French kissing, cunnilingus or analingus with a latex barrier, genital or anal contact with hands or fingers while wearing surgical latex gloves, genital or anal contact with hands or fingers when neither partner has cuts, scratches, or sores on their hands or genitals, and external water sports.

### UNSAFE LESBIAN SEX

Unprotected cunnilingus (especially during menstruation since menstrual blood is currently considered to be the same as any other type of blood), any type of blood exchange, unprotected oral/anal contact, unprotected hand/vagina or hand/anal contact, urine or feces in the mouth or vagina, and sharing sex toys that have come in contact with bodily fluids.

### WHERE CAN I TAKE THE AIDS ANTIBODY TEST?

Certain specific AIDS antibodies tests can help you find out whether the AIDS antibodies are present in your system. Call your local health department and ask where you can get an anonymous AIDS antibody test that will be as specific as possible to your concerns.

Or, call 1-800-342-7514, a 24-hour AIDS hotline, which can direct you to your nearest anonymous testing site.

On Our Backs, 526 Castro St., San Francisco, CA 94114 (415) 861-4723



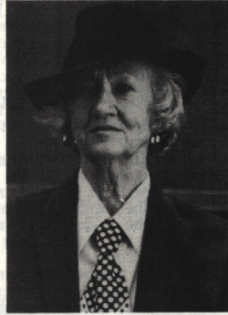
## "If you live, you're going to get old."

How many of us ever consider what that means? And how many older lesbians are showing us the way?

Twenty-four older women share their lives in **Long Time Passing**, this long-awaited look at lesbians and aging. They give us first-hand accounts of lesbian life in decades past, of aging, and of facing their own mortality.

### Long Time Passing Lives of Older Lesbians

edited by Marcy Adelman, Ph.D.



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### SAFE SEX (continued from page 14)

state before the long term symptoms begin. Cathy's first symptoms may have represented this stage of the illness.

The *Annals* report stated that Cathy had had "digital and oral contact" with Jill's menses, and both women had vaginal bleeding as a result of traumatic sexual activities. In short, they were doing what a lot of lesbians do when they make love. (No, it's not just S/M activities that can be "traumatic"; I can't be the only woman on earth who has had my insides accidentally scratched by an ardent lover's fingernail!)

Okay. So it happened once. How likely is it that lesbian AIDS transmission could ever happen again?

First of all, some good news. If your partners are women, they are less likely to have the AIDS virus than if they are men, because in this country there are far fewer AIDS cases in women than in men. But as a worldwide epidemic, AIDS is largely a heterosexual disease, affecting women and men in equal numbers. In the U.S., it has occurred mostly in gay men and in intravenous drug users. Only 7% of the reported cases so far have been in women.

However, the bad news is women are the fastest growing group of people with AIDS. We must remember that this disease has a long incubation period — averaging about five years — and that many people who have no symptoms at all may be carrying the virus and can pass it on to their sex partners. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) uses the formula that there are roughly 40 infected AIDS virus carriers for every reported case of AIDS.

#### WHO WOMEN WITH AIDS ARE

Most of the women with AIDS so far have been intravenous drug users or the sex partners of men who used intravenous drugs. In statistical data, male cases are usually separated into "gay and bisexual" or "heterosexual" categories. Women are lumped together as though we all were heterosexual.

The determined investigator can pry into the innards of the CDC computer to find out more. I put in a call to the CDC last spring. With some difficulty — the doctor I spoke with could not understand why my question would be significant! — I extracted some unpublished information about lesbians and AIDS. Out of the more than 2,200 U.S. women who have been diagnosed with AIDS since 1981, 46 had reported sexual contact with women. In other words, 46 lesbian or bisexual women have had AIDS.

If we use the "40 infected people to 1 reported AIDS case" formula, we can roughly — very roughly — estimate that there could be about 1,840 lesbians in this country who

have the AIDS virus, and could pass it on to their lovers. Most infected people will eventually get sick.

Who are these women? Again, looking at the 46 lesbian or bisexual women who have had AIDS, we may be able to get a rough idea. According to the CDC, 36 of them were intravenous drug users who probably got the virus from a needle containing infected blood; four women reported heterosexual contact with men at risk for AIDS (generally, this means bisexual or IV drug using men); two had received contaminated blood transfusions in the years before all donated blood was tested for AIDS virus antibodies; and two came from countries where heterosexual transmission plays a major role. (This means, usually, Haiti or somewhere in Central Africa. It implies that these women probably had sex with infected men in their home countries.)

The remaining two women had "unknown" risk factors. Generally, "unknown" can mean a number of things (for reasons of confidentiality, the CDC will not release specific information about any cases). Often, the person with AIDS refused to be interviewed, or she died before providing any information about high risk behavior. It may also refer to a woman who has had many male sex partners, none of whom she knew to be particularly "at risk."

#### HOW AIDS IS PASSED

Many sexually transmitted diseases seem to pass most easily from a man's penis to his receptive female or male partner; AIDS appears to be no exception. The amount of AIDS virus which has been found in vaginal secretions is usually less than the amount found in semen. Furthermore, the virus probably passes most easily when there is damage to the internal tissues, which can easily occur during anal intercourse. One study, involving 89 women who were sex partners of men with the AIDS virus infection, found that the women who had anal sex with these men were significantly more likely to contract the virus than women who had only vaginal and oral sex. But it is important to remember that 20% of all of these women — not just those who had anal sex became infected.

Anal sex is especially risky because the lining of the rectum is fragile and easily torn. Vaginal sex with a man can also be risky for a woman, and the virus has been passed that way in most cases of women who got AIDS from men.

However, we do know that the AIDS virus has been found in vaginal and cervical secretions, in blood (including menstrual blood), and in the tissues lining the vagina. That is why AIDS can be transmitted by women to men, through heterosexual vaginal intercourse. It is probably found most often in white blood cells, which can be especially profuse in the

genital tract if a woman has a vaginal infection. Perhaps this is how Jill passed the AIDS virus to Cathy.

Does this mean that all sex is dangerous? Are we going to have to start going to bed all decked out in little rubber suits?

Thankfully, no. First of all, you can't get AIDS from sexual contact unless your partner is infected to begin with. Second, it's not that easy to get AIDS. The AIDS virus is not transmitted every time someone has vaginal or anal intercourse with an infected partner. Cases have been reported in which someone got the AIDS virus from having intercourse just once with an infected person; yet there are also case histories in which heterosexual couples had unprotected sex more than 200 times, and still the virus did not infect the healthy partner. It's not clear why this is so.

The AIDS virus must come into direct contact with the bloodstream in order to infect someone. It seems clear, from studies of thousands of family members and health care workers who came into close contact with AIDS patients, that saliva, tears, and sweat are not means of transmission. There are many kinds of touch, sexual and otherwise, that we never need worry about.

Finally, oral sex is probably less risky than anal or vaginal intercourse. Several studies of large groups of gay men show no association between fellatio and AIDS; in fact, a study done in Pittsburgh found that of 147 gay men who had only oral sex, none became infected with the AIDS virus.

It may be true that the virus is inactivated by enzymes in saliva and/or stomach acids. Since the mouth is less likely to be traumatized during oral sex, the virus has less opportunity to enter the bloodstream. The person receiving oral sex — the one gone down upon — would probably be at little risk of infection if his or her partner carried the virus. Saliva of infected people has been found to have little or no AIDS virus, and would not easily enter the bloodstream during sex.

We can't rule out the possibility of risk — especially if the person performing oral sex has bleeding gums or other mouth sores. In that case, infected vaginal fluids or menstrual blood might find a way into the bloodstream.

It seems logical that if one partner has any cuts on her hands, or even chapped skin or a rash, then the AIDS virus could enter her bloodstream when she touches her lover's vaginal secretions or menstrual blood. In fact, if the one with cut hands is the one who carries the virus, she could infect her lover this way, especially if there is any trauma to the vaginal walls.

What about kissing? Is nothing sacred?

Most doctors say that "dry" kissing is safe, while "French" kissing is "probably" safe. There are no known

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