

CONDOMS

By Tammy Batey
Emerald Reporter

Rubbers, prophylactics, bags, skins, raincoats, sheaths, hats or french letters. Whatever you call them condoms have become synonymous with safe sex.

Now the catchword is safer sex. But how much safety do condoms provide?

Doctors agree condoms do not offer 100 percent protection from pregnancy or diseases including AIDS. Estimates on condom failure rates range from one percent to 12 percent depending on the source.

"Condoms are a means of lowering risk, they don't eliminate risk," said Doug DeWitt, Willamette AIDS Council education outreach coordinator.

The American Pharmaceutical Association reports condoms have a one-percent failure rate, DeWitt said.

"The failure rate is very, very small," DeWitt said. "They're tested very carefully. I believe the failure rate is due almost exclusively to human error."

Oil-based lubricants including Vaseline, Crisco, mineral oil, baby oil, massage oil, butter and most hand creams may weaken the latex of a condom and cause it to break, DeWitt said. Instead of oil-based lubricants, people should use water-based lubricants or jellies.

Storage is also an essential factor, DeWitt said.

"If someone keeps a condom in a wallet and then uses it, it's likely it'll break," he said.

Heat may weaken condoms, according to a 1987 pamphlet titled *The Safer Sex Condom Guide* published by the Gay Men's Health Crisis, Inc. The guide advises people to not store condoms in the glove compartment of a car or in a wallet or pocketbook for a long time.

When purchasing condoms, people should be aware of the date printed on the outer package or on the condom itself. According to the guide, this date is when the condom was made, not the expiration date. People shouldn't use the condom more than two years after the date stamped on it because it's uncertain if it was kept in a cool, dry place before it was bought.

If people follow the guidelines for using condoms, sex will be safer, DeWitt said. Safer sex is needed now more than ever, he added.

"It's a dangerous world out there," he said. "If it's a choice between not being sexually active and using condoms, not being sexually active is safer. But that's not an option for everyone."

People feel uncomfortable talking about sex and assume others know how to use condoms when in fact it's not that easy, DeWitt said. Learning how to use condoms takes time and "you have to practice," he said.

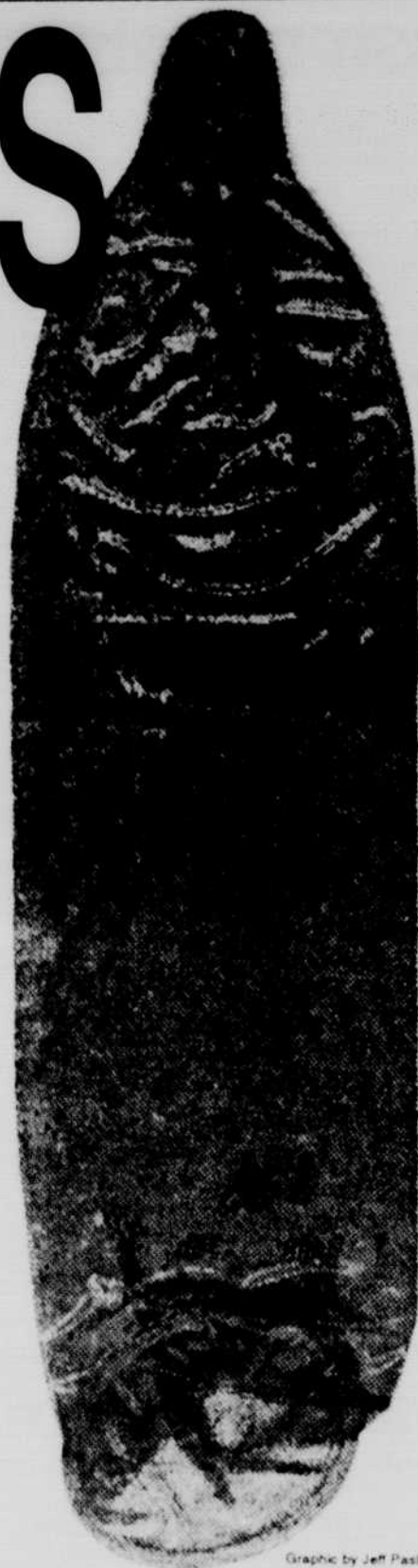
Dr. Robert Noble, professor of medicine at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, said people cannot be trusted to use condoms correctly. High school students are an especially vulnerable group for making human errors in using condoms, he said.

"I don't think we should tell teenagers in high schools there is such a thing as safe sex," Noble said. "Telling them condoms make sex safe is a lie."

In an article published April 1, 1991 in *Newsweek*, Noble said he questioned promoting condoms when they only reduce the risk of transmission of the AIDS virus.

"Reduce the risk of a disease that's 100 percent fatal?" he said. "That's all that's available between us and death."

Safer-sex educators should promote either of three alternatives to help prevent the spread of AIDS, said Dr. Kenneth Guappone, who has a private practice in internal medicine in Port-



Graphic by Jeff Paslay

land.

If people don't choose abstinence they should either have sex with one person who is HIV negative or use condoms, Guappone said.

Planned Parenthood takes their figures on condom failure rates from the 1988-89 edition of *Contraceptive Technology*. Condoms used with foam have a theoretical failure rate of one percent but an actual failure rate, taking into account human error, of five percent. Lubricated condoms with spermicide nonoxynol-9 already on them have a theoretical two percent failure rate and an actual 12 percent failure rate.

Cheryl Long, Planned Parenthood of Lane County community health educator, said she talks about the use of a spermicide such as nonoxynol-9 or foam with the same breath that she talks about condoms.

Besides the standard latex condoms, skin condoms offer people another option though there are still many unresolved questions about their safety, Long said. The condoms are made from lamb cecum, a pouch forming part of the animal's large intestine.

Skin condoms are promoted as more "natural feeling," according to an article in March 1989 *Consumer Reports*. Layers of fibers crisscrossing in various patterns make skin condoms strong. However, this latticework can create an occasional pore large enough for the AIDS virus to slip through.

People should be aware of the risk of transmission of the HIV virus if they choose to use skin condoms, Long said.

"It's an option but it has to be an informed option," Long said. "If latex condoms are driving you crazy or you're allergic to them, natural skin condoms could save your life."

People use many excuses for not using condoms, said Sarah Chartz, Planned Parenthood of Lane County community health educator.

"People think they're a pain to put on," Chartz said. "It's really a personal perception. If you shop around, inevitably you'll find something that works for you."

"There are also value judgments made of people who use them. Women are afraid they'll be perceived as promiscuous. Men are afraid their partners will think they only want one thing."

20% OFF

POSTERS, PRINTS & ART PRINT TEE SHIRTS

AT THE UO BOOKSTORE

THROUGH JANUARY 25

13TH AND KINCAID OPEN MONDAY - SATURDAY PHONE 346-4331

EMU CRAFT CENTER

workshops
studio space
supplies

CLASSES BEGIN SOON!

REGISTER NOW!

ground floor-EMU
info: 346-4361

HELP HEAL THE EARTH!

The Survival Center is looking for dedicated individuals with leadership capabilities and creative problem solving strategies. Positions are available for co-coordinators. Opportunity for organizing locally, regionally or nationally. Stipend available. For more info stop by suite one in the EMU or phone 346-4356.

Survival Center