

Skintimacy

The thrill of barebacking is nothing to scoff at, but neither is commitment to our collective well-being

Barebacking" is a term adopted by those who engage in anal sex without the use of condoms. This activity is on the rise among nonmonogamous gay men. The numbers show it. At least 2 percent of gay men seroconvert each year in major cities. It is a frightening and sobering statistic.

The advent of a variety of protease inhibitors was heralded as a potent and highly effective weapon against the progressive nature of HIV infection. While hospice enrollment declined, the hopes of gay men soared. Fewer people were dying.

Several news stories related that levels of HIV in infected men began to plummet "to undetectable levels." HIV-positive men began to imagine and even plan for a future they had earlier believed had been snatched away from them. Previously ill people returned to work and formed new relationships.

Certainly these statements are very familiar to you. It's old news and those were heady times. Exciting times. As members of a multifaceted queer community, we each felt like a phoenix rising from the ashes of our discontent and pain.

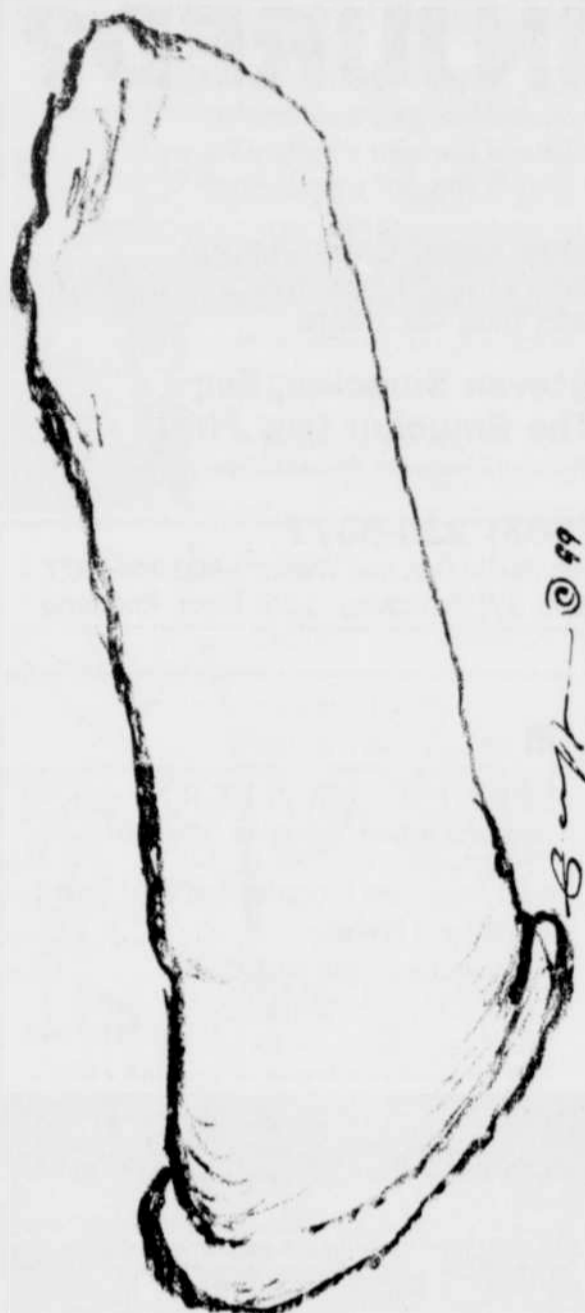
But have we been lulled into a false sense of security by the availability of these strong medications? Do we really believe that HIV/AIDS is a chronic disease? Weary of living in fear and of having our intimacy sheathed in latex for nearly two decades, are we now more willing to compromise the health and safety of those we are sexually intimate with, as well as our own?

The answer for some is "yes." We recognize that combinations of protease inhibitors provide long-term health benefits for many. However, new evidence suggests that the highly acclaimed medications are failing those who need them most. Though drug combinations can delay disease and death, they have serious limitations. Lasting benefits can be as elusive as ever, particularly when a patient doesn't take the medication on a regular basis. People who fail one treatment with a protease inhibitor have only limited success with a second. Cross-resistance among medicines develops and the virus mutates. This is a reality.

Additionally, some drug-cocktail consumers are developing a syndrome of disfiguring fat deposits on parts of their bodies even as their faces and limbs become emaciated. The Food and Drug Administration is concerned that so-called "buffalo humps" on the backs of patient's necks and "protease paunches" are more than minor cosmetic concerns. Some patients are also developing increased risks for heart disease, such as high levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol.

The FDA does not want to alarm people, because the benefits of protease inhibitors still outweigh the risks. I realize the counterproductive effects of fear mongering and do not seek to promote it. However, epidemiologists nationwide have noticed that rectal gonorrhea rates have increased significantly in the gay community. Additionally, unprotected anal sex facilitates the transmission of triple-combination-resistant HIV.

Barebackers are courting a dangerous return



OUTWORD
BY
DINYAR
MENTA

to the dark days of the mid-'80s. In fact, the regression may already have commenced. With this reality in mind, I advocate that as a matter of mutual respect, we need to keep the latex on. Let us reject the option to gamble with our lives, while simultaneously celebrating and expressing gay sexuality responsibly. We must value ourselves and those we are intimate with. Let us not just talk about our responsibility to engage in safer sex—let's practice it.

The only difference between safer sex and barebacking is a condom and an attitude. The two are inextricably linked. That nothing can quite compete with the delicious sensation of skin-on-skin is a no-brainer. However, safer sex can surely be as romantic, pounding, sweaty and hot. It only takes a modicum of creativity to integrate pleasure with protection, to detach eroticism from increased risk.

Learn to feel loved and cared for when a sexual partner requests a condom. Insist on using one yourself. Consider it an invitation to increased intimacy. Eroticize the event to the highest possible degree. Regard it as a delightful compliment to your self-worth.

Safer sex represents a respect for one's value, and esteem for the safety of one's sexual partner. Barebacking can be a very thrilling and natural sexual experience, but is it worth contracting a drug-resistant strain of HIV? Is it potentially worth your life?

We should not delude ourselves into believing that this is a chronically manageable disease that can be "taken care of" by some pills. As liberating and wonderful as barebacking must feel, let us not devalue ourselves. We are worth much more.

■ **OUTWORD** is written by members of Portland Gay Men Writing. Writers interested in contributing should call Alan or Geoffrey at 223-5907.

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