

Q My question is about sex between women. I am a lesbian, and after getting out of a long-term relationship, I am doing the Internet dating thing. I want to have more sex but the only way I can really get into it is if I feel comfortable not worrying about STDs. Nobody I have talked to has used a dental dam! How do I suggest to sex partners that we use gloves and dams? What is the etiquette, and does wanting to use these precautions make me a neurotic freak?

A First of all, respecting yourself and your partner enough to want to care about your health does not make you a neurotic freak.

I am constantly amazed by the lack of conversation we have in the lesbian community about safer sex. Comparatively, the gay boys talk about it all the time. A regular trip with friends to the clinic for an STD check is commonplace for many single, gay men.

Can you imagine going with a group of your favorite lesbo friends to Planned Parenthood for a checkup? I cannot.

A lot of women in the community are in your shoes. We want to take care of ourselves, but either we're embarrassed to talk about safe sex with our partners or we just don't know how to. It's as if, by asking, we're implying that they are dirty, or that we are—that there is something frightening about being intimate, or that we somehow can't trust each other.

The truth is if we respect ourselves, and our



ask a gay

BY KRISTIN FLICKINGER

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partners, we should be having these conversations. We should be working through the shame and embarrassment that we have about enjoying sex as women and heading to the doc for regular checks. We should be doing that for ourselves and our partners.

How do we do that? Directly and clearly.

Be aware of the true health risks. Many of us don't know what they are. We hear that lesbians have a lower risk of contracting things like HIV and HPV (human papillomavirus) than gay men and straight women, and we think that puts us in the clear. But there are real risks to having unprotected, and even protected, sex.

Put yourself and your health first. Know your comfort level. Communicate it up front and stick to it. The last thing you want to be thinking about when a woman is kissing your neck is what your boundaries are, so make sure you're solid about them in advance.

Anyone who wants to guilt you into having unprotected sex when you've expressed that you're not comfortable doing so doesn't have your interests in mind. Actually, I use it as a bit of a test. If a woman isn't willing to talk about safer sex with me or wants to guilt me, she's not someone I want to be in a relationship with—even if chemical reactions in my body are telling me that I really, *really* want to be in bed with her.

I've always been a big proponent of safer sex. My friends know that I "require paperwork" (yes, including proof of a doctor's visit and clean labs) when it comes to intimate partners. I'm a big handwasher and I have plenty of latex on standby. But I found myself forced into a new arena of discussion when I got a surprise from my doctor at my annual a little more than a year ago.

I had HPV. It was a total surprise and a huge

blow. I had been in a monogamous, lesbian relationship for four years. There was no real explanation for how or why, other than the super helpful "any skin-to-skin contact" can transmit. Suddenly I began seeing every handshake as a sex-crushing, intimacy-ending encounter. The knowledge that at least 80 percent of all women have been exposed didn't make me feel better. Most HPV clears the system in two years, but I was pretty sure I'd never have sex again.

But I did. I was up front with the women I dated. When we reached the point where it became relevant, I told them. And we worked together to find what worked for both of us.

It wasn't fun, but it forced me to really consider what my boundaries are and how to talk about them. Now that I'm HPV free, I will be using the skills I learned to talk with a potential partner about safer sex. A simple "I'm not going to have sex with you tonight" whispered into her ear can very clearly manage expectations and start a conversation about boundaries. And, in my experience, if you're nibbling on her ear when you say it, you'll only become more interesting. Women...

My experience with HPV also reinforced the fact that there are amazing, patient, understanding women who respect their partners. Be honest and up front about your boundaries, and you'll find the right one for you. **J**

KRISTIN *really will talk about anything. Try asking over at askthegay.com.*

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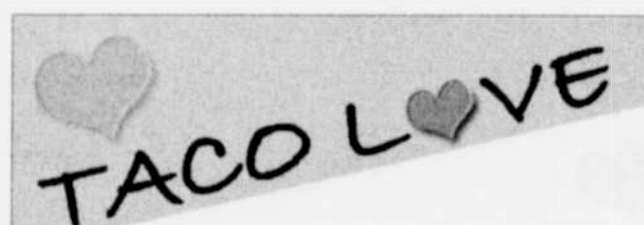


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