

A Bad Wrap

NO SCIENTIST WANTS TO CREATE THE ULTIMATE CONDOM

BY AMY SCHNEIDER

It's a common experience. You're walking down the street, pleasantly enjoying the scenery, when you look down and almost step on the horror of all horrors: a used condom lying on the sidewalk.

We all know that condoms are readily available and people use them all the time (even if we don't want to see the rubbery aftermath at our feet). The problem is that they're not using them enough or with any kind of consistency.

"There are a number of reasons why people don't use them; for one thing, the sensitivity is not very good," says Richard Chartoff, a chemist at the University of Oregon who received a \$100,000 Grand Challenges Explorations Grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to come up with a more appealing male condom, one that people will view as a positive addition to sex, not an uncomfortable inconvenience.

This negative attitude toward condoms is a concern for people of all ages, but it starts with teenagers: According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one in four males and nearly four in 10 females did not use a condom over the course of a month when having sex. Although condoms don't have a perfect track record of preventing pregnancy when people aren't using them perfectly (the CDC says condoms are about 86 percent effective over the course of a year with typical use), they're more reliable than the pull-out method (79.6 percent effective) and much better at preventing STDs than other contraceptives like the pill or IUDs. A *New England Journal of Medicine* study found that, among heterosexual couples where one partner was HIV-positive and the other was HIV-negative, consistent condom use effectively protected the HIV-negative partner from contracting the disease.

Condoms are great for preventing unwanted pregnancies and blocking illnesses, but they do have a reputation for decreasing the pleasurable sensations

that make sex so irresistible in the first place. It's anecdotal that condoms actually reduce pleasure, since having awesome sex is a difficult thing to measure scientifically; some studies, however, indicate that a perceived reduction in pleasure is enough to cause men and women to avoid using condoms.

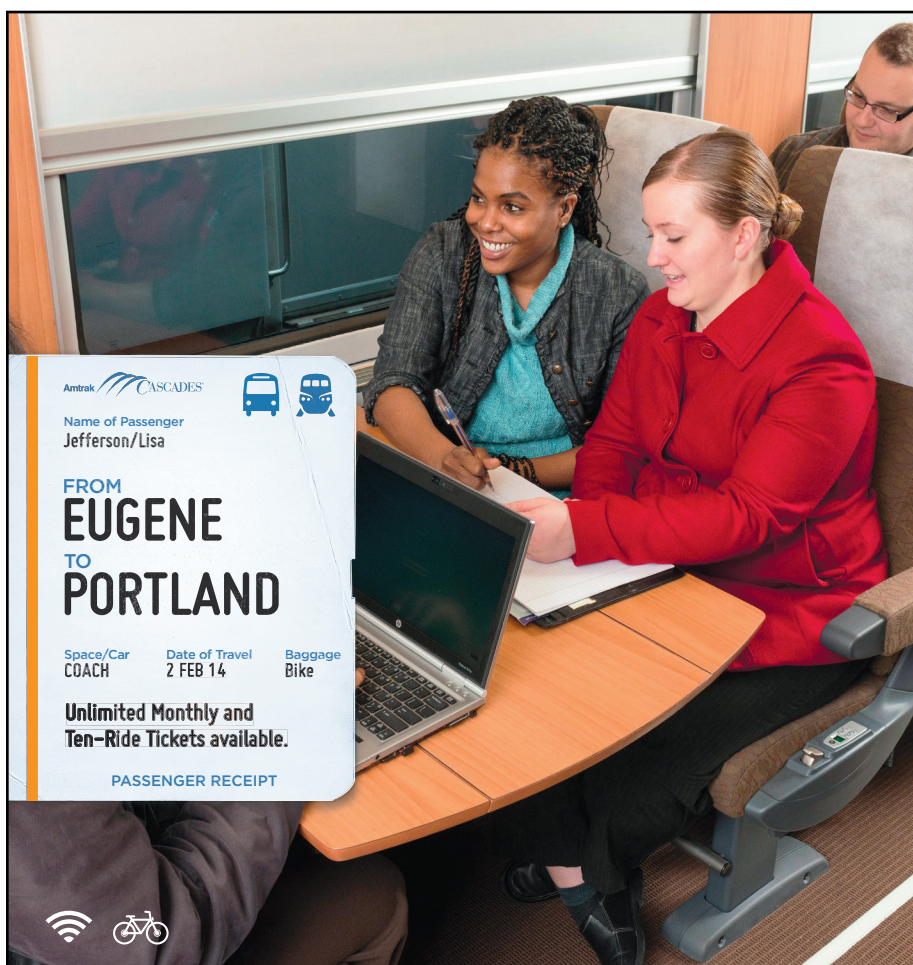
Cultural factors can also influence condom use — in sub-Saharan Africa, where HIV is prevalent, assumed monogamy within a marriage and the importance placed on having children can be enough to dissuade men from using condoms consistently.

That's why Chartoff and his fellow researchers are working on the next generation condom, inspired by Bill and Melinda Gates and their effort to curb the spread of disease in developing countries and elsewhere. Part of this struggle is social — something that will take more than materials science to fix — but Chartoff says the basic design of male condoms hasn't changed in at least 40 years, and that's a good place to start looking for new ideas.

"We're trying to come up with a type of material that has better sensitivity, is thinner and more form-fitting and eliminates the possibility of allergic reactions," Chartoff says. "It needs to be stronger so it won't rip or leak, and it also will provide active disease-fighting capability."

Chartoff is one of 11 researchers who received Grand Challenges Exploration Grants to build a better condom. Other strategies include synthesizing material that mimics human mucosal tissue, creating a condom applicator pack that quickly puts the condom in place and using collagen from cow tendons to simulate a more natural feel. Chartoff says he and his team have 18 months to develop a design, and he's hopeful they will achieve their goal in that time.

"We typically like to work on problems that are complicated, challenging and also end up helping people," he says. "It's a problem waiting to be solved." ♥



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