

Ask the Sexpert-Spring 2006

Gail Wyatt, PhD, director of the sexual health program and associate director of the AIDS Institute at UCLA, assists us between the sheets.

February 16, 2006 By Gail Wyatt, PhD

Q: My boyfriend and I are in love. We've been having sex for six months. Is it safe to dump the rubber?

A: You and your boyfriend need to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV—and see each other's results—before you even consider not using a condom. STDs and HIV are epidemic, particularly in the black community. Some estimates suggest that almost half of black women and 35% of black men are infected with genital herpes alone. Many STDs, including herpes, may not have symptoms. Some are incurable. It's safest to assume your partner has something, whether he knows it or not.

After swapping test results, schedule an appointment with a doctor, nurse or STD or HIV counselor trained to educate you on how to protect each other. If you're both disease-free, discuss contraceptive options. Some couples use condoms as backup to prevent unwanted surprises if a partner is dishonest about being monogamous.

If one or both of you has herpes, human papilloma virus (HPV), syphilis, scabies or crabs, get proper medical care so you don't infect the other. During this time, you can cuddle or massage; however, avoid contact around the penis, anus or vagina until you are noninfectious—meaning that your skin is clear and not red or chafed and you don't have open sores. Although herpes is commonly transmitted through contact with open sores, it can also be transmitted a few days before an outbreak when sores are not visible. If one or both of you is HIV positive, keep using condoms so that the HIV negative partner doesn't become infected or you don't reinfect each other with a viral strain that medications can't treat. Even if the positive partner's viral load is undetectable, transmission is still possible. See your doctor to get evaluated for medication and ask about protection.

But say your partner refuses to get tested or honesty is a problem: Insist on condoms no matter how in love you feel. Your relationship's strength hinges on caring for each other's health and being honest about prior sexual and drug experiences.

