

THE CONDOMIN

Or, how we learned to love prophylactics

In one of the most extraordinary glamour makeovers of our day, an item once considered so loathsome that it was sold mostly from vending machines in gas station men's rooms has now emerged as a leading fashion accessory. Look out world, the condom is in.

It was Benetton, with its unfailing eye for the visual zeitgeist, that certified the condom's apotheosis in its now-famous ad (banned in some magazines, thereby demonstrating just how

trees" unknown to any arborist. They adorn a virtual forest of billboards that have sprouted up in San Francisco, some remarkably graphic. One shows a bare-chested young man lying back in a sexy pose. The caption reads, "The man of my dreams is a rubberman." And a twelve-story-high condom recently appeared at an AIDS rally in Montreal.

All this enthusiasm has taken even the condom industry by surprise. "It's a crazy attitude people have," says George Gori, a vice president and marketing director for Ramses and Sheik condoms at Schmid Laboratories. "Used to be, when condoms were mentioned, people sort of laughed nervously. But everybody loves condoms now."

English overcoats

When the condom made its first appearance in the sixteenth century, it was rather a festive adornment for every man's pride and joy. Gabriel Fallopius, the Italian discoverer of the fallopian tubes, had actually tested a linen version on consumers shortly before Dr. Condom, the mysterious (and possibly apocryphal) court physician to the randy Charles II of England, used sheep's gut scented with sweet-smelling perfume to make what became his namesake. In keeping with the joyful spirit of men's desire to

"take trips into Merryland," English condoms were often brightly colored and threaded with green or scarlet ribbons, like the wrapping on a Christmas present. Casanova lovingly termed them "English overcoats."

It wasn't until the development of vulcanized rubber in the 1840s that the condom became that dreary modern thing, the rubber, and descended into the tawdry kind of love associated with pickup joints, cheap motels and the sticky back-seat of Daddy's Oldsmobile. Condoms, of course, had their advantages, particularly over the diaphragm, in that they were cheap, effective and didn't require fitting by a doctor. But there was also something sad about the way they kept the sexual union from ever becoming total.

Condoms also fell victim to America's amazingly two-faced attitude toward sex, which acquiesces to the use of sex appeal to sell consumer products but is outraged and shocked by devices that facilitate the act itself. So, through most of this century, condoms were relegated to those gas station vending machines or the hidden shelves of drugstores, where customers had to ask for them in the same guilty whispers they once used to request Prohibition gin.

Koop and the condom

The condom's big break came in the summer of 1987 when then Surgeon General C. Everett Koop proclaimed it the first line of defense against AIDS. In an instant, condoms were cleansed of their troublesome sexuality and reborn as agents of good health, like Band-Aids or toothpaste. It was hard to imagine a better promotion, and sales blossomed. In 1981, some 200 million condoms



With the Benetton ad, condoms had officially arrived as part of fashionable mainstream America.

close to the cutting edge it came), showing a kind of parade of multi-colored prophylactics. Condoms had never made a fashion statement quite like that before, and they looked, well, in their diaphanous pastels they looked pretty good, like a school of tropical fish or a gaggle of the very spermatozoa they are intended to contain.

These days, condoms are everywhere. They are on key chains, on earrings and on decorative "rubber

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

G OF AMERICA

were sold in the United States. In 1987, that number doubled.

Condoms started to be openly displayed in drugstores and, perhaps more important, made their way into supermarkets, where they took up positions among the shampoos and the sanitary napkins in the health-and-beauty aisles. In some parts of the country, they've made it into beauty salons, greeting card shops, liquor stores, college bookstores and the bathrooms of chic restaurants, like the Hard Rock Cafe. And educators began giving them away in colleges and some high schools, much to the annoyance of conservatives and condom entrepreneurs who would much prefer to sell their new, zippy products to these markets.

Adam Glickman is one such entrepreneur. A recent graduate of Tufts University, he made a name for himself on campus by going door-to-door selling "Jumbo" condoms, named for the school's elephant mascot. He started Custom Condoms, producing special matchbook covers for condoms to commemorate weddings and anniversaries. Now he and a partner have opened the country's first boutique dedicated exclusively to the condom. Called Condomania, it is located in New York City's Greenwich Village; another opened in October on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, and a third is planned for San Francisco this winter.

With its charcoal and gray walls and state-of-the-art sound system, Condomania "might be selling \$500 handbags," Glickman says. "It's a very, very upscale, slick kind of place." Besides the usual Trojans and Ramses, it carries imported condoms from Europe and Japan, flavored condoms, condoms inside fortune cookies, condoms inside walnuts, Stealth condoms ("They'll

Condomania, with its charcoal and gray walls and state-of-the-art sound system, might be selling \$500 handbags instead of condoms.

Never See You Coming") and, for headwear, condom caps, made of latex with a reservoir tip. "I like to think of my condom store as a kind of neat place to meet people on a Saturday night," he says. "It's fun."

Needless to say, Glickman's isn't the only condom company to see the possibilities created by the new realities. Several manufacturers are marketing condoms directly to women on the assumption that, with AIDS around, they have a special stake in having their men wear them.

A growth industry

Condoms are no longer one-size-fits-all. Most companies now offer a "Large," although none yet offers a "Small"—the less-large condoms are euphemistically labeled "Snuggler Fit." Mark Klein, vice president of marketing for Trojans, claims that 60 percent of his customers prefer a larger size, which is somewhat puzzling considering that the seven-and-a-half-inch "Regular" condom size is well above the six-and-a-half-inch national average for the appendage in question. Possibly customers are being shamed into buying that size.

Says Steve Walters, marketing editor for *Rubber and Plastics News*, which covers the condom industry: "I can't imagine a lot of men saying, 'Oh, no thanks, not the big size for me.'"

Despite all the new products, three companies still dominate the condom industry, just as they did a decade ago: Trojans' parent, Carter-Wallace; Ramses' and Sheik's maker, Schmid Laboratories; and Ansell-Americas, with Lifestyles. Of them, only Carter-Wallace is an American company; the others are English and Australian. Other foreign firms are getting into the act, most significantly the major Japanese firms Sagami and Okamoto.

One wonders why. For all the hullabaloo, condom sales have not continued to surge the way the industry would like and many analysts expected. While sales in some other countries have tripled since the advent of AIDS, condom sales in the U.S. have increased only slightly since the 1987 jump. Last year, they were up a mere 1 percent. And the prediction that women would soon dominate the

(continued on page 124)



HAS LESS THAN 1 PERCENT OF THE WORLD'S REPORTED AIDS CASES

● WHEN STRETCHED TO THE LIMIT,

AN AVERAGE CO

RIBS, BUMPS, NUBS AND SUCH

To enhance sexual pleasure, manufacturers offer a variety of condoms with nubs, ribs, bumps and spirals. But none of these things necessarily makes intercourse any better. To work, an add-on device must protrude at least one or two centimeters, which would bring it into contact with the clitoris upon penetration. The french tickler is an example. But ribbed, nubbed, bumped and spiraled condoms have no effect on the clitoris whatsoever. They're marketing gimmicks, not pleasure enhancers. So don't be fooled.

AVERAGE PENIS IS SIX AND A HALF INCHES

When considering condom size, remember that all men are not created equal. FDA standards dictate that condoms be no smaller than 150 millimeters (six inches) and no larger than 200 mm (eight inches). The standard condom, usually labeled "Regular," is 190 mm, or seven and a half inches. The smaller sizes are euphemistically called "Snug Fit" rather than "Small." And the larger usually carry such he-man monikers as "Max" or "Magnum." Anything bigger than eight inches is a gimmick. Condoms also come in two different shapes. Typically, they are "straight-walled," but some are "contoured," which means they are form-fitting or, more to the point, anatomically shaped and thus more comfortable than the straight-walled ones.

SIZE AND SHAPE

DECONSTRUCTING

THE

● SCHMID LABORATORIES TRIED MAKING A CONDOM FROM PIG

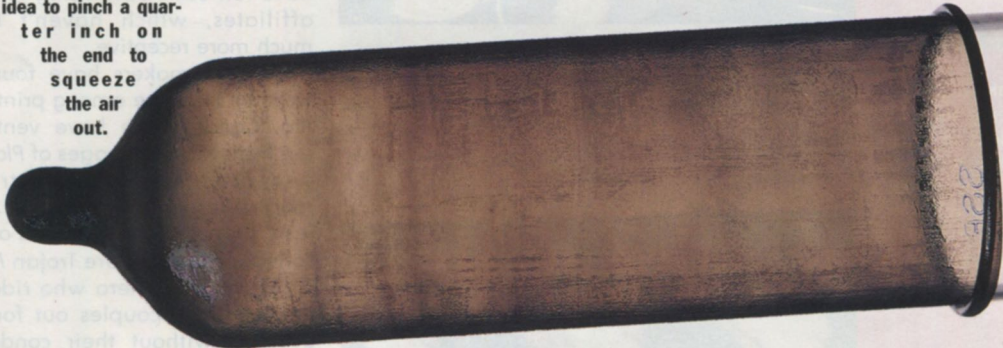
Latex smells and tastes like latex; there's no getting around it. But a new line of fragranced condoms could give new hope to sensitive senses. The aromatic powder they use—sort of like the flavorsome ingredient in chewing gum—**SMELL AND TASTE** masks the unpleasant rubbery odor.

NDOM IS AS TALL AS YOUR TYPICAL TEN-YEAR-OLD

THE CONDOM

STRENGTH The question on everyone's mind is: How tough are they? Well, it depends on what kind of night you're planning. "Extra-strength" condoms are often recommended for anal sex, although whether they're actually stronger is debatable. For vaginal intercourse and oral sex, a standard condom is perfectly safe.

RESERVOIR It's a myth that your condom is likely to break if it doesn't have a reservoir tip to catch the semen upon ejaculation. Unless the condom was already severely weakened, it is in no danger of breaking. Rather, without space at the end, semen can be pushed up and out of the condom or can cause the entire condom to slip off. Whether or not the condom has a reservoir, it is a good idea to pinch a quarter inch on the end to squeeze the air out.

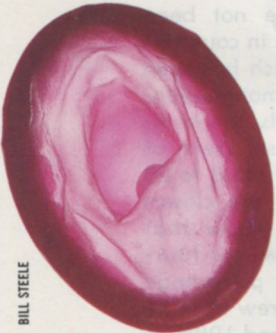


• THE STANDARD CONDOM

IS SEVEN AND A HALF INCHES •

LUBRICANTS Unless you prefer to "go commando"—slang for using an unlubricated condom—there are basically three options for lovers who want things to go smoothly. There's the standard "lubricated" condom, pregreased either with a silicone-based lubricant or aqueous lubricants, typically jelly- or water-based, that feels more slippery to the touch than plain condoms. And there are "spermicidally lubricated" condoms, which use a water-based lubricant that contains Nonoxonyl-9, a contraceptive agent that kills both sperm and some organisms that cause sexually transmitted diseases. ● **WARNING!** If you're using a lubricant of your own, make sure it's water-based. K-Y Jelly and Astroglide are harmless and effective examples. Oil-based lubricants such as mineral oil and Vaseline will dissolve the latex.

COLOR Condoms are available in a rainbow of colors. Blue, green, red and yellow, according to the FDA, are perfectly safe. Black condoms and anything that claims to glow in the dark, however, should be avoided. The FDA warns that the black dye may be a carcinogen and could rub off during intercourse. And if you read the package for glow-in-the-dark condoms, you'll see—in very small type—"not for prevention of pregnancy or disease."



BILL STEELE



GUT, BUT IT WAS A FLOP AND THEY DROPPED IT

THE STANDARD CONDOM

IS EVEN AND A HALF INCHES

RUBBER MADE

Carter-Wallace Inc. is the only major American company that still manufactures condoms. Here's how they make Trojans in their Trenton, New Jersey, plant.

Trojans begin as liquid latex, a rubber compound that has the consistency of milk. (The only other material used for making condoms is lamb's intestine. Called "natural skin" condoms, these are softer, more sensitive and less breakable than latex condoms, but they may be too porous to protect against sexually transmitted diseases.)



Heated to make it pliable, the liquid latex is then applied to mandrels on which it cools and dries in the familiar shape. After the finished products are rolled off the forms, they are tested for strength and reliability.



In one round of tests, the condoms are filled with 300 milliliters of water (about two thirds of a pint) in search of pinholes. For all lots of condoms sold in the U.S., no more than four samples out of one thousand can fail this test or the whole lot will be rejected.



With individual electronic testing, every condom is checked for pinholes via an electrical switching system. All those that fail are discarded; the rest are sold.



(continued from page 121)

market hasn't been borne out. Although their numbers have risen in the past few years, largely because of the condom's appearance in supermarkets, where they do most of the shopping, women still make up only 20 percent of the market. Part of the problem is that companies have had trouble getting their message out in a country that still has deep misgivings about sexual activity that is not intended to produce a baby. The major TV networks have refused to carry national condom ad campaigns, despite a Roper survey showing that two thirds of the public would not mind seeing them. The networks have left such advertising to local affiliates, which haven't been much more receptive.

Condom makers have found a warmer welcome among print media. Condom ads have ventured out from the back pages of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* to mainstream magazines like *People* and *Us*. Trojans' pioneering ads aimed at the college crowd feature Trojan Man, a cartoon superhero who rides to the rescue of couples out for the evening without their condoms. But the results have not been nearly so dramatic as in countries like Switzerland, which has seen an all-media blitz. Among seventeen-to-thirty-year-olds, the number of regular Swiss users of condoms has grown from 8 to 20 percent. In the U.S., the closest comparable figures show that among twenty-to-twenty-four-year-old women, the percentage relying on condoms grew from 11 to 15 between 1982 and 1988.

But there is another reason why Americans may be holding back and that is, no matter how it is packaged and presented, the condom has all the charm of the rubber glove it so closely resembles. What man would want to cover himself with such a thing during sex? The prospect recalls the scene from *The Naked Gun*, in which Leslie Nielsen and his girlfriend are so committed to safe sex that they flounder about in bed with their entire bodies encased in glossy latex. In the end, it is yet another testament to AIDS's frightful power that condoms should now seem not just necessary, but fashionable. □

COURTESY OF TROJAN CONDOMS

SOME CONDOMS HAVE A RING OF ADHESIVE THAT STICKS TO A