

'Thing' of the month

This month:

Condoms...!

The first condoms appeared about 3000 years ago, with ancient Egyptians apparently using linen sheaths and papyrus to protect themselves during sex. In the Far East, the Chinese and Japanese used early protective coverings made from oiled paper and thin leather (called a Kawagata) respectively, and even tortoiseshell was used! The first evidence of use in Europe seems to come from around 100AD from cave paintings at Les Combarelles, in France, and it is possible that some kind of protection was worn in Imperial Rome.

Despite these early claims, the first authentic documentation of condoms is from 1564, when anatomist Gabriel Fallopius designed a linen sheath to go over the tip of the penis and under the foreskin - held in place by pink ribbon, which would be attractive to women. It was primarily invented to protect against syphilis, only later being recognised for its role in pregnancy prevention. The oldest British condoms were found in a filled-in toilet in the keep at Dudley Castle dating back to about 1640.

They were initially made from the caecum or gut of sheep (even fish bladders!), which was soaked, turned inside out, steeped in an alkaline solution, scraped, left in brimstone vapour, washed, blown up, dried slowly, cut into sections and given a ribbon as a tie. This process was rather laborious and so the products were expensive to buy. Therefore, people often only brought one and re-used it, quite often ending up with the same diseases they were trying to prevent!

There is some disagreement about how they got their name. Some suggest that the Earl of Condom was a physician who supplied King Charles II with an oiled sheath made from sheep intestine to prevent him from fathering unwanted children. Others claim the word comes from Dr. Condon or Quondam, or Colonel Cundum, but it's more likely that it is derived from the Latin 'condus', meaning receptacle. The famous lover Casanova allegedly referred to condoms as his "English Riding Coats." Madame de Sevigné, however, was less approving, and she considered condoms to be 'an armour against enjoyment and a spider-web against danger'.

The major leap forward in condom technology was made with the advent of vulcanisation in 1839. Charles Goodyear patented the process in 1844, and Goodyear and Hancock started producing condoms from vulcanised rubber (the nickname 'rubber' still used today), although these early ones had a seam! This process of mixing raw rubber with sulphur under extreme heat made a quality condom that was cheaper, stronger and more elasticated. Men were told to reuse them time and again, to wash them before and after sex and to rub petroleum jelly over them to keep them supple!



The first advert for condoms was in 1861 in the New York Times, which printed a commercial for 'Dr. Power's French Preventatives.' However, in 1873, the Comstock Law was passed, making it illegal to advertise any kind of birth control, and it allowed Post Office personnel to confiscate condoms sent through the mail. Despite these measures, people were still having sex, and they were assisted further by the production of the first latex condom in the 1880s, although it was not until the 1930s that they became widespread. These latex skin-tight condoms - which were thinner, aged less quickly and did not smell - were cheaper and single-use. They were also seamless, made by dipping glass moulds into liquid latex.

During the world wars, governments urged their soldiers to "put it on before you put it in", and by the mid-1930s, 1.5 million were being produced in America alone every day! Following on from this was the development of the 'teat-ended' condom, which was introduced in the early 1950s. In 1957, the first lubricated condom was launched in the UK by Durex. At this time there was also a condom produced that deadened sensation, to the relief of those premature males!

The arrival of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s led to a loss of popularity for the condom, as the pill, the coil and sterilisation became more popular, and new antibiotics reduced the risk of venereal disease. In 1973 the ribbed condom arrived, for 'mutual pleasure'. Following the recognition of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, the use of condoms increased strikingly in many countries; they also became more widely available in pubs, bars, newsagents and supermarkets.

The female condom was introduced in Europe in 1992. In 1994, the world's first polyurethane condom for men, *Durex Avanti*, was launched - a blessing for people allergic to latex. They were also stronger and thinner than latex, safe to use with oil-based lubricants, and non-permeable to all viruses. The 1990s also saw condoms being made in different sizes, shapes, widths and lengths; and the introduction of condoms with a variety of stimulating protuberances, in different colours and flavours, and even glow-in-the-dark ones! The most bizarre flavours we have encountered are: Curry, rhubarb and custard, Champagne, blueberry, lager and lime, tutti frutti, liquorice and whisky. Not sure about the curry one!!!

More than five billion condoms are made every year worldwide, and Japan uses more than any other country. The head office of Fuji Latex (a Japanese condom producer) is even built in the shape of a condom! Condoms can hold up to four litres of liquid - great for the survival kit in emergencies, and apparently, if you boil one in salted water for an hour you can stretch it over a phone box!!!