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Spectrum

The risks of sunbathing and AIDS

By M. P. Clemente

I hardly ever go to the beach. Sunbathing never made much sense to me. Baking in the heat and soaking in the rays to get a healthy look, somehow it seems ironic. So when my girlfriends wanted to spend our last day together at the beach, I was hesitant. I had been away for most of the summer working outdoors, so there was no need for me to work on my tan. However, with the beginning of classes approaching, my girlfriends felt that it would be essential to acquire that “healthy look.” And besides, it would be the last time we would see each other before leaving for school. It was the last day of August when we met.

I was sitting on my towel applying my usual SPF 30 protection. Some say it’s a little extreme because my yellow skin tans so easily and I hardly have problems with burning. However, one can never be too safe. I offered my SPF 30 to my girlfriends, telling them that they should protect themselves. I was reminded that it was possibly the last day of beautiful sunshine and that the purpose was to attract the optimum rays onto our bodies. That day my girlfriends would rather have had baby oil than sunblock.

Since I had experienced sunburn for the first time, two summers ago, I've been obsessed with SPF's and the right brands for my skin type. I'm the person who looks at the ingredients before buying the sunblock. When I tried to push the protection lecture on them they started laughing. "Come on ladies, you should always protect yourselves. Especially in this day and age." As a result of the humor, the topic of conversation turned to sex.

One of my girlfriends, who happens to be the only one in a stable relationship, told us that she asked her boyfriend to test for HIV before she would consent to sleep with him. I was so surprised and impressed. Then my other girlfriend shared with us that she had gotten herself tested just a couple of weeks ago. To her relief, she tested negative. Her last relationship ended because the man that she was seeing took a new lover. He had a promiscuous past and she just wanted peace of mind.

Now I was worried. There are so many precautions that people must take when they decide to get involved in a relationship. It's no longer as simple as "Do you like me because I sure do like you." Now we're in an age of "I sure do like you but first things first, have you been tested for HIV?" I thought about the past affairs I have had and began to feel uneasy. What if I had the virus and didn't know it? I was determined to get myself tested.

You can only get AIDS if there is an exchange of fluids. "Did you use a condom? Did you use protection?" Yes. "Don't worry then, you're in the low risk category." Yes... I lied. I did use protection but not all the time.

did use protection but not all the time. What was I thinking? How could I have been so stupid?

I'm supposed to be an educated and responsible adult. But I couldn't share these thoughts with my girlfriends.

I did my time at the beach and left my girlfriends to the sun. My thoughts were only on getting myself tested. Quickly, I went through the yellow pages in search of the Planned Parenthood Hotline. "Hello, do you do HIV positive testing?" What the hell was I saying? Positive testing? No, I wanted Negative testing. "Yes, you do. Free clinic? Walk-in hours? And I don't have to give my name? Thank you very much." I needed to have peace of mind.

During the summer I taught tennis outdoors and all I would have to do is step out onto a court for an hour and I'd walk off with a tan that most women spend days trying to get. Call it a gift. I call it a curse. When we are young and carefree, we think more of the affects for the present situation rather than what's ahead in the future. It's too easy to be reckless and go without the protection. It's too easy to get caught up in the moment and not know any better. So ladies, read the ingredients. Know the right brands and use them wisely so that there will never have to be a last day at the beach.

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