



Wearable sex toys?
Lorals is rethinking
female pleasure.

SEX

Things are getting hot and heavy, and you both stumble toward the bedroom. After getting naked, you start making your way downtown, moving fast. You then sit up and reach for the dental dam on the nightstand. What's that? You don't? Because "What's a dental dam?"

If you're unfamiliar with the unisex prophylactic known as a dental dam, you're among the majority of sexual beings. Dental dams are thin latex squares you place over a vagina or anus during oral sex to prevent STI transmission. They're often packaged in clunky wrappers and manufactured by companies with clinical names such as HandiDam, Crosstex and

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Trustex. Dams also cost more than condoms and are exponentially harder to buy (good luck finding them at CVS). Overall, despite their intention to make oral sex safer, they end up making it feel like a chore, sending an unfair message to women that they deserve neither safe cunnilingus nor any version of it.

"Stretching a piece of rubber over someone's private parts is not aesthetically pleasing," says Dr. Damian Jacob Sendler, a New York-based clinical sexologist. "There has never been a serious campaign promoting the use of dams for people who enjoy oral sex."

Therein lies the problem. National rates of STIs are reaching record highs, yet culturally, safe sex has remained synonymous with condoms, which are deeply entrenched in our consumer consciousness thanks to their ubiquity, affordability and chic brand names such as Skyn and Trojan. In fact, *Research and Markets* estimates that by 2021 the global condom market will be worth nearly \$10 billion. "But

Hot Dam

*Why the most overlooked prophylactic may finally
make a dent in bedrooms across America*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EVAN WOODS



when it comes to the dental dam, everybody thinks of them as a laughingstock and incredibly unsexy,” says Melanie Cristol, founder of Lorals, a brand she hopes will modernize the dental dam industry.

Dams’ limited use can be traced to the fact that they weren’t intended for oral sex. The first dental dam was invented by dentist Sanford Barnum in 1864 as a tool for isolating a tooth from the rest of the oral cavity. It was only during the HIV epidemic of the 1980s that we co-opted dams for safer sex.

Cristol says her early experiences with dental dams were disappointing—that is, when she could track one down. Their sale is limited almost exclusively to sex-toy stores, Planned Parenthood clinics and online retailers. Even then, they can be a hard sell to a new partner. According to a 2010 study published in the journal *Sexual Health*, only 10 percent of queer women have ever used a dam, and only two percent use them regularly. “It moves up and down on the body. It can go up your nose and into your mouth. It’s hard to breathe. You can choke on it,” Cristol says. “It really detracts from the experience.”

Thus the inspiration behind Cristol’s Lorals, a line of lingerie-like latex designed to be worn during oral sex. Cut like panties and manufactured from FDA-approved materials, Lorals is just one tangible example of a growing trend of enterprising, sex-positive women looking to reclaim female pleasure in the bedroom. For Cristol, that meant reengineering the dam to resemble a bedroom staple that prioritizes not only women’s sex lives but also their health. “There wasn’t a product out there that looked at women’s bodies and tried to figure out the best way to create an STD-prevention device for cunnilingus and rimming,” she says. “I just set off on this quest to try to figure out how to make a better version.”

As it awaits approval from the FDA to market Lorals as an STI-prevention method, the company currently sells its panties as a wearable sex toy. That’s notable because, though blow jobs are commonplace in most heterosexual relationships, studies indicate that more than a third of women need direct clitoral stimulation—like the kind received during oral sex—to reach orgasm. Culturally, cunnilingus is still considered a bedroom novelty. One goal

of Lorals is to motivate men to consider cunnilingus as often as they expect a blow job.

Of course, it will take more than Lorals or DAM—another reimagining of the prophylactic (see *Can You Engineer Good Oral?*, right)—to convince men as well as women to go down on their partners with dam in hand. Enter the women of O.school. Founded by San Francisco-based entrepreneur Andrea Barrica in November 2017, O.school aims to educate people of all backgrounds and sexualities via live streaming and female instructors who are primarily queer and women of color. As O.school’s Kenna Cook told *Glamour* before the site’s launch, “When I talk about dental dams, it’s usually the first time people have seen one. We have almost never been shown barrier protection negotiations before oral sex in any media. I think men—and women—don’t want to look inexperienced.” Similarly, Barrica tells *PLAYBOY*,

“When you reconnect someone to their body, their life changes. They know what they want.”

Media adoption, especially in porn, may help. Sexologist Chris Donaghue, author of *Sex Outside the Lines*, suggests, “Dental dams need to become eroticized to be used more often. Most men still learn about sexuality from porn, which doesn’t show the use of dental dams.” As with all new experiences tied to sex and sexuality, the answer begins with education and exploration. But even with an enthusiastic partner, internalized shame about the way their vaginas look, smell or taste makes some women hesitant to receive oral sex. In a survey of her customers, Cristol found that “four out of five women had declined oral sex when they wanted it, not just because of STDs but because sometimes, early in a relationship, it feels too intimate, or because they weren’t in the right head space to participate.”

In the end, the dental dam renaissance isn’t just a push to correct the product’s design flaws and make a buck in the process. It’s a case of women creating more avenues for safe, mutual pleasure. “Women do crave oral sex. It’s a gift you’re receiving from your partner. For those few minutes, or many minutes, it’s all about you and about your pleasure,” Cristol says. “We’re opening up this option of amazing oral sex for women, whenever they want it, wherever they want it.” ■

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CAN YOU ENGINEER GOOD ORAL?

As a product-design student at New York’s Parsons the New School of Design, **Joya Widney** has focused her thesis work on reimagining sex toys from a queer perspective. Here, the budding designer and self-billed dental dam historian tells *PLAYBOY* about DAM, her pleasure-minded vision for the prophylactic and why she thinks it has been ignored for so long.

Your adolescent experience with sex education focused mostly on condom use. In fact, you didn’t discover dental dams until college. How did that impact your sexuality?

We’re socialized to think that without a penis, there can’t be sex. As a queer woman, safer sex was never something I had to think about. For people who can’t get pregnant, it seems like sex can be riskless. Realizing I could get an STI involved unlearning heterosexual perceptions of what counts as “sex.” It’s not just straight people who laugh about dental dams; queer people laugh about them too.

You can’t go deep during oral if you’re holding a piece of latex over a vagina. How will DAM, which has yet to be manufactured, theoretically make up for this?

One of the biggest issues with dental dams is that while incredibly thin, they don’t translate the intimate texture of a tongue. It’s generalized pressure. You don’t really feel like it’s licking. And there’s no plastic in existence, I believe, that will ever allow for that. So it made more sense to add to the dam versus trying to make it thinner. DAM has an indent for users to stick their tongue in so they have more range of motion, and my dental dam is covered on the interior with a texture similar to a tongue’s. The harness is also designed so the dental dam hugs the body.

Explain the purpose of a harness.

The dam needed to be wearable—something that would fit all body types, that would move with the body in the ways you’re used to—to truly be pleasurable.

You also departed from latex, opting to design DAM as silicone-based. Why?

By using plastic we have a dam that’s sanitizable and reusable, making it more cost-effective. Also, silicone is hypoallergenic. There’s no real alternative on the market.