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Making monogamy look good

By JOAN BECK

Sex without strings. Sex without guilt. Sex without sexism. Sex without old-fashioned legal entanglements or prerequisites or consequences. Sex simply for the joy of sex.

That was the promise and the premise of the change in sexual mores that is loosely dubbed the sexual revolution.

But like a balloon mortgage or a no-fault divorce, it now appears that the advantages fo the relaxation in sexual mores may have been disastrously oversold. Now it's turning out that sex without constraints isn't the same as sex without consequences. There nay well be a steep and lasting price to pay for what used to be called promiscuity. And as usual where sex is concerned, the big losers are women.

What's driving the re-evaluation of sexual conduct is the new and devastating outbreak of sexually transmitted disease (STD) whose effects can include sterility, cancer, chronic pain, problem pregnancies, abnormal children and even death. The growing prevalence of STD may make a case for monogamy in the minds of many who are not convinced by traditional morality.

The term sexually transmitted disease now includes much more than the historically familiar syphilis and gonorrhea. Now there is also genital herpes, which claimed 300,000 new victims last year and remains a thus far incurable, lifelong affliction.

And chlamydia, the STD with the fastest-rising incidence, with 3 million to 4 million new cases last year. And venereal warts, afflicting a million new victims annually and linked to increased risk of cancer. And deadly AIDS, which almost doubled in incidence in 1984 and, it is feared, could become a hazard to heterosexuals as well as homosexuals.

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All together, physicians now know of at least 25 diseases that are spread through sexual contat. Many are occurring in epidemic numbers in the Unite States. Epidemiologists estimate that about 27,000 new cases of STD occur daily and that eventually 20 p.c. of all Americans between the ages of 15 and 55 will be infected. Already, medicl bills for treating STD top 2 billion dollars a year.

In many cases, there is little physicians can do, no antiobiotic to solve the problem as with gonorrhea and syphilis. The effects may not only last a lifetime but may be passed on, with deadly consequences, to victims' children.

A mother who has active genital herpes may infect her baby during the process of birth. More than half of these infected infants die. Survivors are likely to have permanent brain damage. Doctors can minimise the risks by scheduling a Caesarean birth when a mother has visible herpes sores. But some damaged babies are born towomen witholt obvious infections.

Chlamydia and venereal warts can also be transmitted to newborns by infected mothers awith devastating results. And there are cases in which infants have acquired fatal AIDS from mothers.

The litany of problems caused by STD goes on. Both chlamydia and gonorrhea, for example, can cause pelvic inflammatory disease, which can fill the Fallopian tubes with scar tissue, increase the risk of a dangerous ectopic pregnancy and may make it impossible to have children. Chlamydia now ranks as a significant cause of infertility in women.

It's ironic that the same generation of young adults who have such a commendable obsession with fitness and health are also producing an unprecedented epidemic of sexually transmitted disease.

The problem can no longer be brushed off with a shrug about "the love bug" or finessed with one of those "personal ads" in which "attractive, slim single with good job and herpes seeks same for meaningful relationship."

Women, in particular, who care about the health of their bodies—and the well-being of future offspring — need to look realistically at the risks that go with multiple sex partners in the 1980s or even with an unlucky chance encounter, however romantic.

Neither Dear Abby nor Miss Manners nor even the Centres for Disease Control can tell a sexually active adult a tactful, foolproof was to make sure a prospective sex partner won't leave her a nasty and permanent souvenir of their relationship. STD, in fact, is turning out to be a powerful, scientific reinforcement of traditional morality and — what else? — monogamy.

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