Safe sex. Safe sex refers to activities with no risk, or very small risk, of undesirable consequences. Safe sex need not be conservative or monogamous sex, and it certainly does not mean less sex. Sex can indeed be “safe,” not just “safer.”

Disease. Partners who are free of *sexually transmitted diseases can engage in any sexual activities they wish. Since there are diseases which can be transmitted sexually although the carrier is symptom-free and is even unaware he or she has been exposed—hepatitis, AIDS, and cancer-causing venereal warts are by far the most serious—such a disease-free state can only be known through medical examination. In the case of AIDS, since it takes months before tests can detect antibodies to the HIV virus, testing indicates the subject's infectious state as of several months previously. For a result valid at the time of the test, the test must follow a period of no potential exposure. As a practical matter, activities which can transmit disease can only be safe within a relationship monogamous so far as those activities are concerned.

There are, however, many ways of having a great deal of fun, even kinky and adventurous fun, with little if any risk of disease and without need for examinations and tests. *Masturbation in pairs and groups is totally without risk. Among consenting partners, dirty talk, exhibitionism, and photography are safe. No one has gotten a disease from an odor, from *fantasy, role-playing, erotic *clothing, or bondage (*S/M). One can safely be promiscuous with such activities, if desired, and those who are HIV-positive can fully participate.

Kissing and licking of unbroken skin cannot transmit disease. Intercourse with a barrier, such as a strong condom (extra-strength condoms are available and recommended for anal sex), is safe as long [p. 1147] as the bar-
rier remains unbroken. Ample use of a water-based lubricant reduces the risk of breakage.

The activities which can transmit disease are those in which one receives orally, anally, vaginally, or through broken skin a substance from inside someone else's body: semen, seminal fluid (pre-cum), vaginal secretions, blood, urine, feces. Saliva is not known to play a significant role in disease transmission. Sexual toys can harbor microorganisms, and if they cannot be cleaned thoroughly or covered with a condom they should not be shared. A finger or penis can transfer disease organisms from one orifice to another, or one partner to another; washing before changing to a different orifice or partner is sensible. If fingers are inserted into the anus, a rubber glove is recommended; it also prevents dangerous internal scratches from fingernails. While the HIV virus is absorbed through the colon or breaks in the skin, and there are no known cases of its transmission via oral-genital sex, the hepatitis viruses, gonococcus, and other microorganisms are hardier and are readily transmitted orally. A condom or (for women) a dental dam makes oral sex safe.

Injury. Sexual play, like other recreations, has various additional hazards; pornography tends to ignore these. The colon is easily injured, and such injuries require immediate medical attention. Sharp or breakable objects should never be inserted into the anus, and any anal play should be slow and careful, with lots of lubricant. While restraint (bondage) can be very erotic, for safety it should be limited to partners one knows and trusts. Ropes can injure the skin or nerves, and specialty stores sell safer hardware, such as padded cuffs. Abnormal weight distribution, as in suspension, can cause injury. Restriction of circulation from ropes can cause serious tissue damage, and restriction of breathing is potentially fatal. Gagging or any other type of restraint requires constant monitoring and provision for immediate release in an emergency.

Planning, negotiation, and communication are essential components of safe erotic play. An agreed-upon “safe word” can be used to signal the need to lessen or stop
activity which is undesirable. The use of alcohol or other drugs increases risk.

Eroticism and danger. For many people a touch of danger enhances a sexual encounter, and there are those for whom sex without danger is uninteresting. One may rationally decide that the enjoyment an activity offers makes its possible negative consequences acceptable. Some behaviors have such a high risk, however, that they must be considered self-destructive, and may indicate the need for *therapy; these include unsafe sex with partners not checked for disease, public or semi-public sex without concern for possible legal consequences, and exposing oneself to assault from unstable partners. It is possible, though, to incorporate limited and controlled danger in sexual activities. The presence of a caring and vigilant third party reduces risks. Some semi-public sex involves only minimal risk, and for willing partners to enact fantasies of danger—a pretend assault and rape, for example—can be very enjoyable.

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Bibliography: Richard Locke, In the Heat of Passion: How to have Hotter, Safer Sex (San Francisco: Leyland, 1987); Pat Califia, ed., The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual (Denver: Lace, 1988), which has much information of value to all those who are sexually active.