Camping with condoms: Are they biodegradable?  [1]

Hey, Alice.

My girlfriend and I are planning to hike the Appalachian Trail this spring. We're both 18, just recently sexually intimate. Is there a condom that is biodegradable that we can use on the "trail"?

Thanks,
Environmentally Aware

Answer

Dear Environmentally Aware,

Way to plan ahead for your big trip! Latex condoms are (theoretically, after many, many years and under the right conditions) biodegradable, while polyurethane male and female condoms are not, since they're made of plastic. Take a look at Environmentally-friendly condom disposal [2] for thorough information on condom deterioration once you've disposed of them. Worth noting, lambskin condoms are biodegradable, but offer no protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

Regardless of biodegradability, be considerate and dispose of your used condoms (and their non-biodegradable wrappers) the same way you would at home: in a trashcan. Even biodegradable condoms won't disappear before the next campers come through your campsite. You can wrap used condoms in tissues and throw them in trash bins along the trail, or save them in a sealed ziploc bag for disposal at a later time. Many female campers recommend the same treatment for used tampons or pads.

If you leave your condoms to the elements, hoping for their quick decomposition, that's littering. It will take a long time before the condoms begin to fade away into the scenery; years, or even decades. In the meantime, you'll ruin the beauty of the trail. Burying them is also not a good idea, since they're bound to come to the surface eventually. The same goes for tossing them into any rivers or lakes you come across. (Think about the small woodland creatures that could get stuck inside one!)

Condoms are a great form of contraception and STI protection, however if you're worried about accumulating extra trash, there are other options out there. If you and your girlfriend are both monogamous and have tested negative for STIs, you might want to consider a birth control method that produces less waste to deal with while you trek. You can read about other
options in Alice's Sexual and Reproductive Health archive.

Happy hiking!

Alice!
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