

# THE SAFETY OF NONWATER-SOLUBLE LUBRICANTS IN THE VAGINA

By Gary Schubach, Ed.D., A.C.S.

For some time, it has been the conventional wisdom that the use of nonwater-soluble lubricants during sexual activity could lead to yeast and other bacterial vaginal infections. Doctors are taught this in medical school and many noted reference books on sexuality repeat this claim.

The basic argument is that nonwater-soluble lubricants will not easily wash out of the vagina or be absorbed. This can lead to alkalinization of the vagina and an imbalance in the pH which creates conditions for possible bacterial infections.

Like all assumptions, this view is subject to examination. Recently, someone challenged this prevailing perspective by objecting to statements I had made regarding the "My Pleasure" self-pleasuring cream that I sell on my website. It is composed of beeswax and extra virgin olive oil, both nonwater-soluble. As a responsible sexologist, I felt a need to warn potential purchasers that this product is not meant for intra-vaginal use and **could**, in some women, at some times, lead to yeast or other vaginal infections. I made it clear that this is by no means certain and many women are able to tolerate nonwater-soluble lubricants such as natural oil, mineral oil or Vaseline™. In addition, this same person also made a statement that propylene glycol, widely used as a diluent in water-soluble vaginal lubricants, has been **proven** to cause liver or kidney damage.

When I set out to research these issues, I discovered a total absence of any research studies backing the prevailing view about nonwater-soluble lubricants. I wrote a letter to Johnson & Johnson, the manufacturers of various mineral oil based products. They responded in writing that they "do not recommend Johnson's Baby Oil™ as a personal lubricant." Similarly, Cheesebrough Ponds, the manufacturers of Vaseline™, made it clear that their product was not considered safe for vaginal lubrication. However, to be fair, Vaseline™ has been the lubricant of choice for over twenty-five years in one sexual community and they anecdotally report no unusual occurrence of vaginal infections.

The person challenging my statement cited The AMA and the *New England Journal of Medicine* to support his position that mineral oil and Vaseline™ are safe as vaginal lubricants. These citations turned out to be nonexistent. A reference from the same person that "The American Family Physician's Patient Information Handout regarding vaginal yeast infection makes no mention of oil based lubricants or mineral oil being involved at all" turned out not to support his position. I contacted the American Academy of Family Physicians and they repeated the prevailing wisdom that nonwater-soluble lubricants should not be used in the vagina.

There were a number of good studies on propylene glycol. It is used in many oral, injectable and topical medications as a vehicle to enhance solubility. In one of the studies, a two-year-old boy swallowed 2,000 mg of propylene glycol from an open container of styling hair gel. He suffered the effects of propylene glycol intoxication including central nervous system depression and a severe metabolic acidosis. The child was treated with no further adverse effects.<sup>i</sup> In another case, kidney damage was reported in a sixteen-year-old boy. In this case, the boy had been injected with a variety of drugs containing propylene glycol.<sup>ii</sup>

It should be noted that the concentrations of propylene glycol present in the two cases mentioned are substantially greater than in water-soluble lubricants. There have been reported cases of contact dermatitis associated with propylene glycol but the occurrence is very rare. Frankly, there are many ingredients in various vaginal lubricants that someone somewhere will be allergic to. In any case, the prevailing medical wisdom, including the FDA, is that propylene glycol is safe for vaginal use in the minor concentrations involved in lubricants.

I have tried to be fair and open minded with these questions. All women are different and have to make their own choices regarding their bodies and what they put in them. Just because something is considered a "known" fact does not by itself make it true for all people. My position as a responsible sex educator is to give a warning that nonwater-soluble lubricants may **possibly**, in some women and at some times, create an environment for vaginal infections. For anyone to say for certain that nonwater-soluble lubricants are either totally safe or unsafe is an irresponsible position and one that does not serve the cause of women's health.

#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Glover, Mark, Pharm.D and Reed, Michael D., Pharm.D., "Propylene glycol: The safe diluent that continues to cause harm," *Pharmacotherapy*, 1996;16: 690-693

<sup>ii</sup> Yorgin, MD, Theodorou, MD, Al-Uzri, MD, Davenport, MD, Boyer-Hassen, MD and Johnson, MD, "Propylene glycol - Induced proximal renal tubular cell injury," *American Journal of Kidney Diseases*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (July) 1997: 134-139.