Soap opera on her cell phone plays to at-risk young women

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“Hey baby, you okay?” Mike asks his girlfriend as she sits down next to him.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Toni says, and she puts her head on his shoulder. Mike thinks it’s safe to move in for a kiss.

“Slow down,” she says, pushing him back. “Just because I’ve decided to take you back, it doesn’t erase the fact that you cheated on me.” He looks away sheepishly.

“Look, we’re going to be using condoms from now on,” Toni says. “And tomorrow, we’re getting tested. And that’s that.”

She kisses him, and Mike manages a little smile.

The scene is from a soap opera with a purpose: to use short videos to go beyond pamphlets on safe sex and deliver the message to women who might otherwise tune it out.

Nursing educator Rachel Jones developed the education campaign, using professional actors and scripts based on focus groups with women in Newark and Jersey City. Mike and Toni and the “other woman,” Valerie, are in a pilot video available online.

“Women who watched the first pilot were [See CELL SOAP, Page 19]

Message to women:
Practice safe sex

getting upset, angry, exacerbated,” said Jones, who teaches at Rutgers University’s College of Nursing in Newark. “Women really saw themselves in that video. We’re really resonating with urban contemporary themes that we believe are relevant to women.”

Jones, a Boonton Township resident, filmed a series of 12 soap opera vignettes with a Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey grant, and recently received a $2 million National Institutes of Health grant to test the campaign’s effectiveness.

Women in the federal study will watch the 20-minute episodes on their cell phones. Their risk-reduction behavior will be measured against a control group that will receive text messages urging condom use, but no video. A total of 250 women will participate.

“We have to normalize condom use,” she said.

Jones said women experience pressure to have unprotected sex and that their partners often consider insistence on using a condom as a sign of distrust.

“These relationship concerns can feel much more important in the moment for some women than reducing HIV/AIDS, which can feel more distant,” she said.

At the end of the study, all the participants will get a DVD with all the soap opera videos, she said. The videos will also be available on the Web.

“If we know we’re effective, we’re going to dedicate ourselves to getting them out,” Jones said.

To see the video, log onto www.stophivienewark.rutgers.edu.