

Microbicides: A promising HIV prevention option for African American women

African American women bear the disproportionate burden of HIV.

African Americans are disproportionately affected by HIV, as with many other diseases of poverty and limited resources. The spread of HIV is fueled by poverty, lack of access to health care, distrust of health systems, inadequate resources, and myriad other social factors and inequities.

Although they only account for 13% of the U.S. population, African Americans account for half of all new AIDS diagnoses in the U.S.ⁱ **Two out of three American women newly diagnosed with AIDS are African American.**ⁱⁱ African American women are 19 times more likely get infected by HIV than white women in the U.S.ⁱⁱⁱ Most women with HIV, both in the U.S. and worldwide, became infected through sex with men.^{iv}

Men have condoms. Women need prevention tools they can control.

Biologically, women are two to four times more vulnerable than men to sexually transmitted HIV infection.^v Their risk increases in situations of poverty, abusive relationships, sexual violence, or other circumstances in which women cannot always control sexual encounters or insist on protective measures like abstinence, mutual monogamy, or condom use. Negotiation about safe sex can also be more difficult for young women. In a study of African American women ages 13 to 19, 26% felt little control over whether or not a condom was used during intercourse; 75% agreed that, if a male knew a female was taking oral contraceptives, he would not want to use a condom.^{vi} Many women who get infected with HIV are in long term relationships and have no other risk factors for infection other than sex with a primary partner. African American women – and all women --need HIV prevention tools that we can control to safeguard our health and that of our families. We need **microbicides**.

Once available, microbicides could give women a new way to protect themselves against HIV.

(MĪ-KRO'-bī-sīdz) Microbicides are a new type of product being developed that people could use vaginally or rectally to protect themselves from HIV and possibly other sexually transmitted infections. Microbicides could be produced in many forms, including gels, creams, suppositories, films, lubricants, or in the form of a sponge or a vaginal ring that slowly releases the active ingredient.

Are microbicides currently available?

No. Scientists are currently testing many substances to see whether they help protect against HIV and/or other STIs, but no safe and effective microbicide is currently available to the public. However, scientists are seriously perusing over 50 product leads, including about a dozen that have proven safe and effective in animals and are now being tested in people. It is impossible to say how long it will take to find a microbicide that is both safe and effective. On average, new drug development takes over a decade from discovery in a research lab to availability on the market. Ninety percent of candidates that enter preclinical testing are rejected before they enter clinical trials.

Only a few microbicide candidates are in the last stages of testing to determine whether they are effective (which can take up to 4 years). We do not know yet whether these candidates will work. If a trial shows that a microbicide does work, at least another two to four years will be required for individual countries to go through their own regulatory and manufacturing processes to make the



microbicide available. Due to these individual country processes, it must be noted that a microbicide will not be available in all countries at the same time and not all people within a country will get it at the same time. It is likely to be made available to some women and not others during introduction and scale-up.

The under-funding of microbicide research and development is slowing down the process of finding safe, effective new tools as quickly as possible. Although global investment in the field has grown significantly, the amount of money going into microbicides needs to double and be sustained at the doubled level for at least the next five years to really accelerate progress toward getting a safe and effective microbicide on the market as quickly as possible.^{vii}

What if a woman wants to get pregnant?

Women need to have access to microbicides that can prevent pregnancy and microbicides that allow pregnancy. Contraceptive microbicides could provide both pregnancy and STI prevention to women wishing to meet both needs with one product. The candidates furthest advanced in trials right now are all non-contraceptive. But it is possible, if one of them proves effective, that a contraceptive component could be added.

African American women play a vital role in advocating for safe and affordable microbicides.

If we want a safe and effective microbicide, we have to demand sufficient government funding to develop them without delay. Advocates all over the world are raising their voices in the growing public demand for microbicides. African American women can help shape microbicide research and work toward access to safe and effective microbicides as soon as possible.

It is essential we convey these clear messages in the African American community...

Microbicides will not eliminate the need for condoms.

Microbicides alone will probably never be as effective as correctly used condoms. They will, however, offer back-up protection for condom users. Most importantly, they offer a real prevention alternative for people who can't or don't use condoms. In the end, no single technology or strategy will solve the AIDS pandemic. We must employ all existing prevention options, including behavior change, voluntary counseling and testing, STD diagnosis and treatment, broad access to male and female condoms, and access to anti-retroviral drugs. African American women can help ensure that clear messages about microbicides and condoms are conveyed in their communities by sharing real information about why we need multiple HIV prevention tools. See www.global-campaign.org for free fact sheets.

Men can benefit from microbicides too.

Although it is possible that microbicides could protect HIV positive women's partners, it is also possible that they will not. Trials with serodiscordant couples will need to take place in order to test this. It may also be possible to develop microbicides that can be used rectally, but the safety and effectiveness of microbicides for rectal use must be established separately. Rectal safety studies of some potential microbicides have started.

Making sure they are safe is the highest priority.

Any new product must go through rigorous safety testing before becoming available to consumers. Women's health activists and researchers are working closely together to ensure that the clinical testing of microbicides is thorough and ethical. African American women can:

- Learn more about how clinical trials are done and what steps must be taken so that trial participants are respected and protected (see http://www.global-campaign.org/ethics_community.htm).

- Ensure people can participate in trials by making sure trials are well publicized, that they are in convenient locations, and that child care is provided as necessary.
- Participate in local trials or monitor their progress so women are involved in an informed way.
- Join a Community Advisory Board convened by research institutions to get input from community members.

Microbicides must be affordable and accessible.

Once a safe, effective microbicide is developed, we need to make it accessible to women and men who need it at a price they can afford. Advocates are working with researchers and policy makers now to address issues of access and affordability up front. African American women can help voice the demand that microbicides are made accessible not only to women in developing countries, but right here at home too.

Lend our voices to a worldwide effort – Visit www.global-campaign.org for more information!

Microbicide research depends on government support and investment. Right now, only about 2 cents out of every dollar spent on AIDS research goes into developing safe, effective microbicides for women to use. We have to demand more! You can join in making this demand by:

- Asking your legislators to sign on to the Microbicide Development Act.
- To find out how, go to <http://www.global-campaign.org/> and click on “Write to Congress!”
- Hosting a talk on microbicides at your community group, church, or organization.
- Signing up for our monthly e-newsletter, GC News.
- Hosting a screening of our film, *In Women’s Hands*.
- Asking your organization to endorse the Global Campaign – it’s free and will put you “in the loop”.
- Ensuring that key messages like those above are conveyed loud and clear in your community.

ⁱ Kasier Family Foundation Factsheet: the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States, November 2005.

ⁱⁱ CDC, HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, Vol.16, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ CDC, Diagnoses of HIV/AIDS—32 states, 2000–2003. *MMWR* 2004;53:1106–1110.

^{iv} CDC, HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, Vol.16, 2005.

^v See Global Campaign factsheet on *Gender Equality* for more information.

^{vi} Overby KJ, Kegeles SM. The impact of AIDS on an urban population of high-risk female minority adolescents. *J Adolesc Health* 1994; 15:216-27

^{vii} HIV Vaccines and Microbicides Resource Tracking Working Group, Tracking Funding for Microbicide Research & Development: Estimates of Annual Investments, 2000 to 2005. August 2005. Available at www.global-campaign.org/download.htm