

Frequently Asked Questions

About Microbicides

What are microbicides?

(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 a number of forms, including gels, creams, suppositories, films, lubricants, or delivered through 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 pursuing over 50 product leads, including about a dozen that have proven safe and effective in animals and are now being tested in people in clinical trials. 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 (laboratory) 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 if these candidates in the research pipeline 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 regulatory 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-up¹.

How would microbicides work?

Microbicides could potentially work in a number of different ways. Some candidates might be broad spectrum (meaning they would work against other STIs as well as HIV), however most current candidates are HIV-specific and based on anti-retroviral drugs.

Would microbicides eliminate the need for condoms?

No. When used consistently and correctly, male or female condoms are likely to provide better protection against HIV and STIs than microbicides, so they will still be the preferred option. But for people who cannot or will not use condoms, and particularly for women whose partners refuse condoms, using microbicides would save lives and have a substantial impact on the spread of HIV.

What if a woman wants to get pregnant?

The candidates furthest advanced in trials right now are all non-contraceptive. Ideally in the future, women would have access to microbicides that could 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. But it is possible, if one of them proves effective, that a contraceptive component could be added.

Would microbicides protect against all sexually transmitted infections?

¹ For more information on the exact number of candidate products in the pipeline, please visit the Alliance for Microbicide Development's website at www.microbicide.org

Although protection against HIV is the primary goal, we hope that microbicides that could protect against other STIs as well as HIV might also become available in the future.

Would microbicides be safe?

Any new product must go through rigorous safety testing and receive government approval before becoming available to the public. Women's health activists and researchers are working closely together to ensure that the testing of microbicides is thorough and ethical. Fortunately many of the substances under investigation are commonly used in drugs that are already available.

Would men benefit from microbicides as well?

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.

Who is working on microbicides research and development?

Virtually all microbicides research to date has been conducted by non-profit and academic institutions or small biotech companies. Studies are funded by charitable foundations and government grants. These public funds also support basic science, social and behavioural research, and clinical trial infrastructure that contribute to microbicides research and development. Large pharmaceutical companies have not invested significantly in this field. This is mostly because profits from sales of microbicides are expected to be low.

Why do we need microbicides if we will eventually have an HIV vaccine?

No one strategy or technology will "solve" the AIDS pandemic. We must employ all existing prevention strategies—such as behaviour change, voluntary counselling and testing, STI diagnosis and treatment, broad access to male and female condoms, access to sterile syringes, and anti-retroviral interventions—as well as expand our repertoire of tools and technologies. Microbicides will likely be available and accessible sooner than an HIV vaccine. Even after a safe and effective vaccine is discovered, vaccines and microbicides will have different, complementary roles to play in an integrated, multi-faceted global HIV prevention strategy.

How much will microbicides cost, and will people be able to afford them?

It is essential that microbicides get into the hands of women and men who need them at a price they can afford. In the past, new health technologies have rarely become widely available in developing countries until more than a decade after their approval in the North, an unacceptable delay for this life-saving technology developed primarily with public funds. Advocates are working with researchers and policy makers now to emphasise the need to address issues of access and affordability up front, in order to be prepared to deliver a microbicide rapidly as soon as one is proven safe and effective.

How can you get involved?

Visit the Global Campaign for Microbicides website (www.global-campaign.org) to sign a petition, sign up to receive news, write to your parliamentarian, meet up with local advocacy groups in your region, and learn more about microbicides. We need your help to make a safe and effective microbicide available as soon as possible.

GCM is a diverse network of advocates and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) working worldwide to expand HIV prevention options and encourage ethical research that involves civil society.
Visit our website: www.global-campaign.org or email: info@global-campaign.org