

Violence against Women: Implications for HIV and Microbicides

Violence and HIV: both are potentially deadly and both have persistent negative effects on health and well-being. Multiple factors put women in violent relationships at increased risk of becoming infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including:

Biological factors:

- Forced sex can increase risk of infection. Bleeding or tearing of the vaginal or rectal area creates passageways for HIV to enter the bloodstream, thus facilitating infection.
- Women are already at least twice as likely as men to contract HIV from unprotected vaginal sex, in part because semen carries more HIV than vaginal secretions.
- Vaginal membranes are exposed to infectious fluids for hours after sex. Younger women are at highest risk because the immature cervix is more vulnerable to damage.
- STIs often go undetected, and therefore untreated, in women. Untreated, they increase women's vulnerability to HIV and can lead to infertility, ectopic (tubal) pregnancy, infant mortality, and cervical cancer.

Economic factors:

- Lack of access to fair-wage jobs, minimal work experience or education, isolation, discrimination, and deprivation of property rights are just some of the factors that can render women economically dependent on their partners.
- The power imbalance created by economic dependency and violence can leave women unable to “negotiate” condom use or to leave partners who put them at risk.

Cultural factors:

- Many societies around the world expect women to be faithful even when men are not. A woman's partner puts her at higher risk of HIV when he has multiple sex partners.
- In many cultures, girls are discouraged from learning about their bodies and sex, and they are taught to regard their bodies as the property of men (fathers, boyfriends, or husbands). Under culturally enforced ignorance, powerlessness, and the threat of violence, many women experience little or no control over when and how sex happens in their lives and may see sexual decision-making—including condom use—as the domain of men.

What are microbicides?

Microbicides (mī-KRO'-bī-sīdz) 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. They are likely to come in a variety of forms such as a gel or cream inserted with an applicator, a sponge or time-released suppository, or an intra-vaginal ring that could potentially be used for a month or longer.

Microbicides could benefit women in violent relationships.

A microbicide could help protect women in abusive relationships from HIV (and possibly other sexually transmitted infections) thus reducing the potential burden on their already compromised physical and psychological well-being. A contraceptive microbicide could also prevent unplanned pregnancies. Since women in violent relationships may be unlikely to be able to negotiate contraception or condom use, microbicides could offer them a valuable alternative means of protection.



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Will microbicides be contraceptive?

Ideally, women would have access to microbicides that can prevent pregnancy and to microbicides that allow pregnancy. Contraceptive microbicides could provide both pregnancy and STI prevention to women wishing to meet both needs with one product. They would also offer a much-needed alternative to women choosing not to use hormonal birth control methods like pills or patches. The candidates in clinical testing right now, and most in the laboratories, are non-contraceptive. But it is possible, if one of them proves effective, that a contraceptive component could be added. We also need non-contraceptive microbicides. With condoms, women have to choose between childbearing and HIV prevention. Access to non-contraceptive microbicides would give women a third option—one that blocks infection and allows pregnancy to occur.

Will they protect against all STIs?

Although protection against HIV is the primary goal, we hope that microbicides that will also protect against STIs will be developed. We are hopeful that “broad-spectrum” microbicides, capable of preventing HIV and at least a handful of other STIs, will become available.

Will a woman be able to use a microbicide without her partner knowing about it?

Microbicides may come in gels or creams, so those products would likely increase vaginal lubrication somewhat. So their usage by women in long-term relationships may be noticeable. However microbicides that come in the form of vaginal rings and films are also being formulated. A flexible, microbicide-loaded vaginal ring, for example, could provide time-released protection with minimal lubrication change, which may meet the needs of women who can't or don't want to discuss the issue of protection with their male partners. (However, men may feel the vaginal ring during sex.)

Ideally a microbicide user would talk with her partner—well before they are engaged in sex—about using protection, so he would expect a change in the sensation. Many couples report a preference for sex with a product, as they have come to enjoy a more lubricated sexual experience.

A woman who can't safely raise the topic of HIV or STI risk with her partner may choose to claim that she is using the product for hygiene, contraception, or sexual enhancement rather than for disease prevention. The substantial market for "vaginal cosmetics" of all types (such as douches and deodorant sprays) is problematic from a health standpoint. But it does show that products are used in many parts of the world already and may offer a ready excuse to the woman in need of a pretext for her microbicide use.

Why aren't microbicides available now?

Scientists have identified dozens of potential microbicides and are assessing which ones could be safe and effective for regular use. Unfortunately, not enough funding is available to move their research along efficiently. Getting a microbicide on the shelves doesn't depend as much on scientific innovation as it does on increasing the level of funding to support research, development, and access. If we want microbicides, we have to demand sufficient funding—from governments, industry, foundations, and other sources—to develop them without delay.

Microbicides and safety planning

With microbicides, women could reduce infection and potentially unwanted pregnancy risk, even in the context of forced unprotected sex. For HIV-negative women, microbicides could offer the hope of leaving an abusive relationship still uninfected. Women living with domestic violence struggle every day to regain control over their own bodies and futures. Microbicides could become one more tool for achieving that goal.

The Global Campaign for Microbicides (GCM) is a civil society organization working to ensure the ethical and accelerated development of, and widespread access to, new and existing HIV-prevention options—especially for women.

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