



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.¹ **Two out of three American women newly diagnosed with AIDS are African American.**² African American women are 19 times more likely get infected by HIV than white women in the U.S.³ Most women with HIV, both in the U.S. and worldwide, became infected through sex with men.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

Microbicides are products designed to help prevent the sexual transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) when applied in the vagina. Microbicides are being developed in many forms, including gels, creams, suppositories, films, or as a sponge or ring that releases the active ingredient over time.

Microbicides could be available in the next 5 to 7 years.

Scientists have identified more than two dozen products that may have microbicidal properties, including 15 that are now in clinical trials to determine their potential safety and efficacy for human use. Some of these products would be contraceptive, others may enable women to protect their health and still have children. If one of the five products currently in large scale effectiveness trials proves successful and there is sufficient investment, a viable microbicide could be on the market in the next five to seven years.

Lack of funding is slowing down microbicide research.

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.⁷

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.

A bi-directional microbicide (one that disables HIV in both semen and vaginal secretions) would help HIV positive women protect their partners from HIV infection, as well as protect themselves from re-infection. African American men can and should get involved in advocacy and trials for microbicides.

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.

¹ Kasier Family Foundation Factsheet: the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States, November 2005.

² CDC, HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, Vol.16, 2005.

³ CDC, Diagnoses of HIV/AIDS—32 states, 2000–2003. *MMWR* 2004;53:1106–1110.

⁴ CDC, HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, Vol.16, 2005.

⁵ See Global Campaign factsheet on *Gender Equality* for more information.

⁶ 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

⁷ 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

This fact sheet was produced in March 2006 in collaboration with African American Women Evolving, Black AIDS Institute, Black Women's Health Imperative, NASTAD's African American Advisory Committee, SisterLove, and SisterSong. The Global Campaign for Microbicides appreciates their endorsement of the Campaign's mission and their support in providing this critical information to African American communities. Updates and more information are available at www.global-campaign.org.