

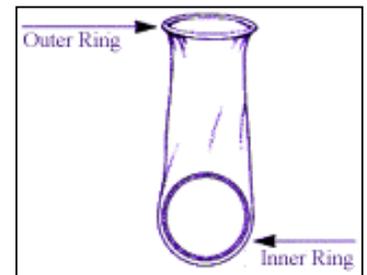
Frequently Asked Questions About THE FEMALE CONDOM



The female condom is the first woman-initiated barrier method that protects against HIV and STDs as well as pregnancy. Since its introduction in 1992, the female condom has become available in 70 countries. In addition to benefiting women's sexual and reproductive health, the female condom "contributes to women's sense of empowerment, especially if supported by education and informational activities."¹

What is the female condom?

The female condom currently available is manufactured by the Female Health Company. It is a transparent sheath of polyurethane, with a flexible plastic ring at each end, that fits inside a woman's vagina before intercourse. (Polyurethane is a soft thin plastic that is stronger and conducts more heat than latex.) A woman squeezes and inserts the inner ring into the vagina, where it rests behind the pubic bone. The outer ring remains outside the vagina, keeping the female condom in place and providing some protection for the vulva and outer genitalia. It prevents semen from coming into contact with the vagina, offering protection from both pregnancy and infection.



Is the female condom effective?

The female condom is as or more effective at preventing pregnancy as other barrier methods, and between 94% and 97% effective when used consistently and correctly.² Female condoms are at least equivalent to male condoms in preventing common STDs, and are estimated to reduce the risk of contracting HIV by 97% for each protected act of intercourse.³

How is the female condom different from male condoms?

Perhaps the most important difference is that the female condom is "worn" by the woman, not the man, so that women have more control over its correct and consistent use. The female condom can be inserted up to eight hours before intercourse begins and does not have to be removed immediately following, so using it is less likely to feel disruptive. It's made of polyurethane, not latex, so it does not cause allergies or irritation, and it can be used with both oil-based and water-based lubricants. Also, the female condom fits more loosely, so it is not constricting like the male condom, and it covers the external genitalia as well.

Do women like them?

Women's perceptions of the female condom have been researched in virtually every type of culture and setting. While individual women's responses vary, certain pros and cons of the female condom emerge consistently. Women often say that using the female condom feels more like unprotected sex than the male condom. In addition, they like the added sense of safety and control that the female condom offers. While most women use the female condom with the cooperation of their partner, some say that the female condom is a good option when their partner is drunk or angry, and some women even report being able to use it surreptitiously.

¹ UNAIDS. 1997. *The Female Condom and AIDS*. UNAIDS Best Practice Collection. Geneva: UNAIDS. October 1997.

² World Health Organization and UNAIDS. 1997. *The Female Condom: An Information Pack*. Geneva: WHO,UNAIDS. April 1997.

³ Trussel, J, Sturgen K, Strickler J, and Dominck R. 1994. Comparative contraceptive efficacy of the female condom and other barrier methods. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 26: 66-72.

Women who try but don't continue using the female condom complain that it is intimidating or difficult to insert, or that it becomes dislodged or makes noise during intercourse. Research shows that many of the most common complaints about the female condom can be partially or totally overcome by good introductory counseling, sustained information and support, and practice.

What do men say about the female condom?

In acceptability studies, many men say that they prefer the female condom to the male condom for a number of reasons. The female condom more closely approximates unprotected sex, because it retains body heat, its use doesn't interrupt the sexual act, it does not require the man to maintain an erection throughout its use, and it does not constrict the penis. Some men also say that they like the female condom because they don't have to "bear the responsibility" for protected sex. However, some men still respond to their partners' suggestions to use a female condom with patriarchal and dangerous ideas that condoms permit female promiscuity or violate trust within a couple. Successful female condom promotion must target male attitudes and address gender power dynamics.

"Most men do not want to use condoms, and, in Ghana, when it comes to sexual relationships, women do not have the power to negotiate. In our culture, it is accepted that men can do what they like. So what we've seen is that ordinary women are faced with infection. We had to find a way to protect women, and we found the female condom"

-Alice Lampty

Can the female condom be used more than once?

Currently it is recommended that the female condom be used once and discarded, although research and anecdotal reports show that some women do use the female condom more than once. Several studies have attempted to determine the safety and acceptability of reusing the female condom in an effort to make it more economical. Laboratory studies show that structurally, the female condom remains sound and will still prevent the passage of pathogens and sperm after as many as ten washings with a variety of regimens, including bleaching. However, many people are concerned that re-inserting the condom may introduce new pathogens, or that women will not wash it properly, or that they will reuse the condom without washing it at all. WHO has convened two expert consultations to review the various studies and form recommendations to the field. While WHO continues to recommend the use of a new male or female condom for every act of intercourse, the consultations did note that, for some people, the alternative to re-use could be unprotected intercourse, and that there is an urgent need for guidance on this issue. A draft protocol for disinfecting, washing, drying, storing and re-lubricating the female condom is currently under evaluation, and another consultation will take place at the end of 2002 to examine programmatic implications of a potential re-use recommendation. As soon as results are available, WHO will provide further guidance on this issue. In the meantime, female condoms must be accessible and affordable so that women are not tempted to reuse them for the sake of economy or convenience.

How will women, especially poor women, afford them?

The Female Health Company has established a Global Public Sector price of 38 pence (about 54 cents) per unit through UNAIDS. Governments, donors and NGOs can purchase female condoms in bulk and distribute them for free or at highly subsidized prices, in order to ensure that they are affordable in local economies. As more countries introduce the female condom as a core component of their reproductive health and HIV prevention strategies, demand will increase and manufacturing costs and price per unit will decrease.

Why should governments, donors, and NGOs invest in the female condom?

While clearly more expensive than male condoms, female condoms offer an option for people unable to use male condoms consistently and correctly. When people have a choice of methods, they are more likely to find one

they are able to use, and more acts of intercourse are protected.⁴ Promoting female condoms is also cost-effective in terms of cost per infection averted.⁵

How can we make female condoms more accessible?

"Accessibility" depends on a number of factors and requires strategic planning and commitment in order to provide the greatest benefit to women and men, and to public health in general. The cost of the female condom remains the major barrier to access. The public sector must play a role in making female condoms widely available and affordable, as well as generating awareness of their benefits. Guaranteeing accessibility requires a sustained commitment to providing ongoing support for users and providers, through informational materials, promotional messages, and training.

How can the female condom be introduced in a community?

Although the male condom is an important option to protect couples against HIV transmission, the female condom gives us yet another choice. HIV prevention programs are not complete without an advocacy and education component on the female condom.

*-Bunmi Makinwa
Intercountry Team Leader
for Eastern and Southern
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Introduction of the female condom should be integrated into existing male condom and family planning programs, and could take place through health care settings, existing service delivery points, community organizations, social marketing programs, school-based sexuality and life skills programs and through targeted intervention strategies. Training and outreach that address potential provider bias, explain proper use of the female condom in simple terms, involve men, and incorporate education on sexuality and negotiation should always accompany the introduction of the female condom. Successful introductions have come from collaborations between local organizations, UN agencies, ministries of health, and the Female Health Company. Efforts so far have generated many valuable lessons, and experts are available to assist with national and local level strategic planning for adding female condoms to existing prevention strategies.

Additional Resources

Family Health International www.fhi.org

Network: Female Barrier Methods, 2000, Vol 20, no. 2.

<http://www.fhi.org/en/fp/fppubs/network/v20-2/index.html>

FHI Research Briefs on the Female Condom

<http://www.fhi.org/en/topics/fc/index.html>

Female Health Company www.femalehealth.com

The Female Condom: A Guide for Planning and Programming

<http://www.femalehealth.com/IntlProGuideCoverPage.htm>

Population Council Horizons Project

Research briefs on the female condom

<http://www.popcouncil.org/horizons/ressum/zimbabwe.html>

Safersex.org

Guidance on insertion

<http://www.safersex.org/barriers/reality.html>

UNAIDS www.unaids.org

Documents on female condom

<http://www.unaids.org/publications/documents/care/index.html#female>

⁴⁴ Fontanet AL, Saba J, Chandelying V, et al. 1998. Protection against sexually transmitted diseases by granting sex workers in Thailand the choice of using the male or female condom: results from a randomized controlled trial. *AIDS* 12(14): 1851-59.

⁵ World Health Organization and UNAIDS, 1997.