

Nonoxynol-9 Spermicide on HIV Risk List

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September For years, people working within the HIV/AIDS community believed that the spermicide nonoxynol-9, when added to lubricants and condoms, would kill the HIV virus. In fact, they strongly recommended its use...until about a decade ago.

In the early-'90s, the HIV community learned that the spermicide also had a side consequence: it could cause abrasions and irritations in the lining of the rectum, making users of the product more vulnerable to infection.

"In the early-'90s, AIDS hotline workers went from recommending nonoxynol-9 to telling callers that it would, in fact, increase the chance of someone becoming HIV-infected," says Colin Brown who volunteered for

the HIV/AIDS Hotline in Los Angeles.

Nonoxynol-9, working like a strong soap, breaks up or irritates the cell lining, or epithelium, of the rectum (and the vagina, for that matter) -- the first line of defense against HIV and other diseases. Such irritation can make it easier for a virus or other infective organism to invade.

What had become common knowledge within the HIV/AIDS medical community, however, took much longer -- nearly 10 years -- to penetrate the corporate eyes of the outside world.

Was the decade-long delay a question of dollars and cents on the part of companies that use the spermicide in their products sold to the gay community? Is it possible they, too, knew this information years ago, but didn't want change their product's formula *and* didn't want to lose customers?

Or was it because anecdotal evidence wasn't considered enough to make a change in successfully selling products?

Follow the Money

Check the packaging and the curious will find that nonoxynol-9 is the only kind of spermicide used in condoms and lubricants domestically -- it accounts for a significant share of the world-wide condom market, which is about \$4 billion.

It is a large market by any yardstick, and it is logical from a business standpoint that no one in the lubricant/condom game wanted to poke a hole in a tumescent market segment. Logical, yes, but is it ethical?

Even after this summer's studies released by the Centers for Disease Control, or CDC, and the World Health Organization, which found conclusive evidence that the

disinfectant could increase the risk of contracting HIV, not all lubricant and condom makers have ceased using the spermicide – nor do they plan to.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, drug giant **Johnson & Johnson** is among the only producers halting manufacturing of nonoxynol-9-enhanced lubricants and condoms. **Mayer Laboratories** Inc., which says it is the fourth largest condom maker in the U.S., will also stop selling nonoxynol-9 products.

But J&J and Mayer Labs appear to be industry leaders, without many followers. A spokesman for the Advanced Medical Technology Association, which represents medical-device makers, says that the top three condom makers have no plans to pull their products from the market – products that account for about 40 percent of the \$295 million U.S. condom market.

The No. 1 selling U.S. condom brand, Trojan, a subsidiary of **Armkel** LLC, a joint venture between **Church & Dwight** Co. and **Kelso & Co.**, says they have no plans to stop using the spermicide, but plan to "improve labeling."

Coinciding with the CDC's conclusion about the dangers of nonoxynol-9, Trojan just announced a first-ever plan to enter the gay media to sell their condoms, some of which may include the spermicide nonoxynol-9. (see "[Commercial Closet: Trojan Finally Gets Into Bed with Gays.](#)")

Based on the widely publicized conclusions of the World Health Organization and others, Trojan's planned entry into the gay media is troubling. If the use of condoms is to prevent infections (when used by gay men), their decision to continue using nonoxynol-9 would seem a counter-productive exercise to their products intended purpose.

City Leaders React

With some lubricant and condom makers seemingly more interested in profits than protection, public health officials and local city leaders have decided to take matters into their own hands.

In the Bay Area, San Francisco Supervisor Mark Leno last week requested legislation that would ban the sale in San Francisco of sexual lubricants that contain the spermicide nonoxynol-9.

The nonoxynol-9 lubricants "are a danger to public health and should be banned as soon as possible," Leno said.

Extra Danger for Gay Men

The use of a product that can break up or tear rectal cell lining is of particular concern for gay men. The increased danger in anal sex is especially significant because the rectum has only a single-cell wall; the vagina has a wall that is about 40 cells thick. Weaken that wall and a more direct route for infection becomes readily available.

"We knew the dangers years ago," says Brown. "We advised people to continue using water-based lubricants – but to find one without nonoxynol-9. It took a long time, but the word is finally out there."