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Condom, Lube Alert Popular spermicide ingredient may increase HIV risk

By DUNCAN OSBORNE

New York -- A coalition of roughly 85 scientists and health groups called on manufacturers of condoms and lubricants to stop using nonoxyonol-9 in their products because the spermicide may facilitate HIV transmission rather than prevent the spread of the virus that causes AIDS.

"The science has proved us wrong," said Lori Heise, director of the Global Campaign for Microbicides, during a September 26 conference call. "Contrary to widespread belief it does not help prevent the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases."

Some evidence suggests that nonoxyonol-9 may help spread HIV, according to Dr. Kenneth Mayer, a professor at Brown University. He noted several studies that showed that nonoxyonol-9 can strip away layers of protective cells in the rectum and cause inflammation there. That could make a person having unprotected anal sex more susceptible to HIV or other infections.

"The acute effect of N9 can actually lead to a denuding or loss of these layers," Mayer said. "I think we have sufficient science... that suggest the need to publicize the message that N9 is not protective against HIV transmission and it might even increase the risk."

The message is especially important for some men who have sex without condoms and use a lube with nonoxyonol-9 in the belief that it gives them, at least, some protection from HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

Additionally, nonoxyonol-9 may make condoms deteriorate faster, according to David Mayer, president and CEO of the San Francisco-based Mayer Laboratories.

"Condoms lubricated with nonoxyonol-9 have a shorter shelf life," he said. "It does have an effect over time." (Kenneth and David Mayer are not related.)

The expiration dates on condoms reflect that short shelf life. Mayer Laboratories manufactures and sells Aqua Lube and Kimono condoms. The company has voluntarily removed the spermicide from its products. The coalition did not call for a government ban on nonoxyonol-9.

"We're hoping that we don't have to use a huge blunt instrument like a bureaucracy," Heise said.

The group is engaged in a balancing act.

For some American women nonoxyonol-9 is effective in preventing pregnancy when used with a barrier such as a condom or diaphragm. The product is used by women who cannot tolerate hormone-based birth control methods.

"Nonoxyonol-9, as a contraceptive, is both effective and important in the arsenal of birth control products for women," said David Mayer.

But nonoxyonol-9 can be just as harsh on vaginas as it is on rectums.

A study conducted in Africa from 1996 to 2000 recruited nearly 1,000 HIV-negative, female prostitutes, according to a report from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They were trained to use condoms, but half used a lubricant with nonoxyonol-9 and half used a lubricant without nonoxyonol-9.

Researchers found that the women who used the nonoxyonol-9 had become infected with HIV at about a 50 percent higher rate than women who used the other lube. Nonoxyonol-9 did not protect against HIV infection and may have caused more HIV transmission, the report concluded. Women who used nonoxyonol-9 had more vaginal lesions that might have facilitated HIV transmission.

Heise said it was possible to educate consumers about who should use products with nonoxyonol-9 and who should not.

"I think it's possible if we make a concerted and coordinated effort," she said.