

Campaigning for Microbicides



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Women need HIV-prevention tools

Growing worldwide HIV infection rates show the need for new methods of protection against HIV and STIs. Rising numbers of women living with HIV in the UK, particularly among women from African communities, reveal that women are twice as likely as heterosexual men to become infected with HIV. Consistent (or any) condom use is hard to achieve for women. The world urgently needs HIV prevention tools that women can control.

Potential options: microbicides

Microbicides are products that are designed to prevent the transmission of HIV and some other STIs. Gels or creams containing a microbicide are applied vaginally or rectally to prevent infection. Microbicides could also be put in a spongy, suppository or a vaginal ring. Some could also be contraceptive so that women could both become pregnant and protect themselves, or their partners, from infection. Microbicides would also be useful to people living with HIV because they could help protect negative partners in different-status relationships and against the risks of re-infection and of the development of treatment resistance. Microbicides use four approaches: preventing the virus from attaching to host cells, by killing or disabling it before it can infect cells, by strengthening the body's own immune self-defence system, or by limiting the viruses' ability to make huge numbers of copies of itself.

The first wave of microbicides are not as effective as condoms, so they would need to be used with condoms and to complement existing HIV prevention efforts. Condoms are not practical for many women unable to insist on their use, so microbicides that will offer some protection to women are better than no protection at all.

Microbicides are not yet available. Why not?

Microbicides are still being researched and tested. About 30 are in development. Three are now in the last stage of testing, with the results expected within two years. If successful, and with enough investment, a microbicide could be distributed in a few countries by the end of 2010. One of the microbicide trials was ended recently because of safety concerns. The trial was stopped as soon as there were any doubts, which is a success for advocates acting for the trial participants, who have campaigned for constant safety monitoring. The health of trial participants is more important. The purpose of phase 3 trials is precisely to spot such problems before treatments and drugs are released to the wider public.

The first generation of microbicides are likely to be 40 to 60% effective at blocking transmission. For women who do not have any other options, this is much better than not having any protection whatsoever. However, to offer full protection to the most vulnerable, scientists and researchers will need to significantly boost the level of protection that microbicides can offer.

Funding for all stages of microbicide research and development must be made a priority until a microbicide that is safe, highly effective and affordable exists. The UK has committed government funding towards microbicides research and the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation is devoting \$60M. Nevertheless, we need more and sustained funding.

How about men?

Men, like women, need a choice of HIV prevention methods. Scientists are investigating the potential for rectal use of microbicides for both homosexually active men and heterosexuals who have anal sex.

What's the Global Campaign for Microbicides doing?

HIV advocates keep a close watch on the progress and publicise the issues and need for microbicides. These are a new prevention method and the public needs to hear and think about the issues.

Recently, George House Trust worked with the UK African Microbicides Group and hosted a seminar on microbicides. Angelina Namiba, Lydia Zigomo and Mary Lima gave presentations about the research and development and the ethical issues involved.

There was a big crowd and lively discussions about the role of pharmaceutical companies in the research and development of microbicides, the need for rectal microbicides because of the prevalence of anal intercourse in all communities, and the need for social research into the acceptability of microbicides to men.

When a partially effective microbicide does become available, the UK will need to decide whether they should be promoted and used here. Informed HIV advocates will need to make themselves heard in the decision making. If you want people here to have the choice of microbicides for those who want them, make sure your voice is heard!

Global Campaign for Microbicides

www.global-campaign.org
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