



A UNAIDS Initiative

**The Global Coalition
on Women and AIDS**

Backgrounder

BASIC FACTS ON THE FEMALE CONDOM

*The female condom is a strong, soft, transparent polyurethane sheath which, when inserted in the vagina before sexual intercourse, provides protection against most sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and pregnancy. It forms a barrier between the penis and the vagina, cervix and external genitalia. It is stronger than latex, odourless, causes no allergic reactions, and may be used with oil-based and water-based lubricants. It can be inserted prior to intercourse, is not dependent on male erection, and does not require immediate withdrawal after ejaculation.**

The female condom is an additional method for HIV prevention.

- The male condom until recently was the only “barrier” method available for the prevention of HIV and most sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The female condom offers an additional option that enables women to control the means to protect themselves from HIV and other STIs as well as unwanted pregnancies. The female condom has an important role in HIV prevention. It is a prevention device that is helpful to women who are in sexual relationships or settings where they are not in a position to negotiate the use of a male condom due to personal and cultural constraints.
- The female condom does not replace the male condom as a means of protection. Studies show that the introduction of female condoms in settings where the male condom is also available has resulted in an increased incidence of protected sex acts. For example, a study in Thailand showed that when both female and male condoms were available to users, STI incidence rates were reduced by a quarter.

It is an effective and safe method.

- Laboratory studies have found female condoms to be impermeable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and trichomoniasis, one of the most common STIs occurring in women. It has been found to give comparable levels of protection against STIs and pregnancy as the male condom.
- Research confirms that the use of the female condom has no serious side effects. It does not produce irritation or allergic reactions in people sensitive to latex.

The female condom has many advantages.

- Acceptability studies among various groups of women, including young married women and formal sex workers in Malawi, Kenya, Cameroon and Thailand have cited that women found control over their own sexual health as the biggest advantage of the female condom. This is because they can initiate its use, and they can insert the condom well before sexual intercourse.
- The female condom can be used with both water-based and oil-based lubricants without compromising the technical integrity of polyurethane. This is an advantage to many who find water based lubricants hard to find and obtain.

- Because it covers both the internal and much of the external female genitalia, it offers more extensive barrier protection against STI transmission.
- No special storage arrangements are needed because polyurethane is not affected by changes in temperature and humidity.

It is acceptable to a wide range of women and men.

- In a 1997 review of 41 acceptability studies conducted in a diverse range of cultures and settings, on average, 50-70% of women and men found the female condom acceptable (WHO, Reproductive Health Research, 2000). It particularly appeals to women who want to be secure about protecting themselves from HIV and STIs and unwanted pregnancies and have partners who do not like, or choose not to use male condoms. Men have responded favourably to the female condom because it does not interrupt sexual spontaneity and does not reduce sexual pleasure. People who are HIV positive or have HIV positive partners and need always to have protected sexual intercourse have found the female condom an appropriate prevention method, while remaining sexually active.
- Studies conducted by WHO, the Female Health Company, Population Services International (PSI), Family Health International, and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) concluded that women in stable relationships who introduced female condoms to their partners reported improved communication regarding safer sex in general, and about faithfulness.

Concerns about the female condom can be overcome.

- The **cost** of the female condom is a major barrier to making it accessible to greater numbers of women. UNAIDS has negotiated a public sector price of US\$ 0.58 per condom for the FC female condom. As male condoms cost only US\$ 0.03 per unit, the current cost of the female condom is considerably higher. Governments must play a lead role in purchasing female condoms in bulk, having them available at affordable prices through subsidies, and generating awareness of their benefits. This will help make female condoms accessible and used by women, while eventually leading to lower prices. Donors should also be mobilized by countries to include female condoms within their funding priorities as a way of sustaining its supply.
- Some women **reuse** the female condom for reasons of economy or convenience. WHO recommends use of new condoms, whether male or female, for every act of intercourse. It is conducting further studies on the safety of disinfection, washing, drying and re-use of polyurethane condoms.
- Experiences of social marketing programmes for the female condom in Zambia and Zimbabwe show that, when strategically introduced, significant **demand** can be generated. These programmes have, in addition, contributed to increased access, recovery of initial investments, and effective positioning within the range of contraceptive products (UNAIDS, 1999). Critical factors include: involvement of men from the start, training of service providers to overcome their personal biases against barrier methods and the female condom, partnerships with non-government and community-based organizations for outreach education, advocacy and distribution.
- Systematic **integration** of female condoms into HIV prevention and reproductive and sexual health programmes increases knowledge and use of both male and female condoms. Examples of programmes where integration is possible include: HIV/AIDS prevention education, family planning services, STI clinics, adolescent health services, social marketing programmes, workplace initiatives, and gender sensitization activities.

The female condom is a way of addressing gender inequalities that are a major obstacle in HIV prevention.

- The female condom provides the opportunity for women to actively protect themselves from HIV infection. It is a method they can choose and initiate. It enables them to be in a position where they learn about their reproductive health in general, which is an important building block in HIV prevention. When women can protect themselves from HIV infection, they have an increased sense of self-worth. This could prove to be one of the most important elements in fighting the AIDS epidemic.

The Female Health Company (FHC) is the sole manufacturer of FC female condom and all studies and information listed in this note are for FC female condom only which is manufactured solely by the Female Health Company (FHC). Other female condom products are currently being developed but none of these have been approved for use as either contraceptives or HIV/STI prevention methods

Reference materials

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