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Advocates Urge Removal of Spermicide from Condoms

(WOMENSENEWS)--Scientists and health advocates on Thursday urged manufacturers of condoms and sexual lubricants to remove the spermicide Nonoxynol-9 from their products, citing studies that show it increases risk of HIV transmission.

"The belief that N-9 helps prevent HIV is deeply entrenched and it would take years and a massive public education campaign to set the record straight," said Lori Heise, director of the Global Campaign for Microbicides. "The most prudent thing to do is to eliminate the risk by removing N-9 from lubricants and condoms now."

Studies published since 2000 have shown that rather than protecting against HIV as hoped, N-9 actually increases risk of infection by destroying or irritating cells in the rectum. N-9 is considered less risky when used vaginally, though it has been shown to increase the risk of genital lesions in women who use it multiple times a day, a factor that can encourage transmission of the virus.

A World Health Organization report on N-9 released in June recommended that condoms containing the spermicide "should no longer be promoted" because of evidence that the ingredient increases risk of HIV transmission when used rectally.

Though N-9 has been used for more than 50 years as a contraceptive, it was added to sexual lubricants and condoms in the 1980s, when scientists mistakenly believed it would offer protection against HIV. It now is contained in the outer lubrication of 42 percent of condoms sold commercially in the United States and about half of those available worldwide.

Heise said removal of N-9 from condoms and lubricants would benefit women as well as gay men because studies indicate that between 6 percent and 13 percent of women engage in anal sex. She added that advocates were not calling for the removal of N-9 from products designed exclusively for vaginal use--such as certain gels and creams that are used alone or in combination with a diaphragm or cervical cap--because the spermicide is still moderately effective as a contraceptive.

At least five condom and lubricant manufacturers--including Johnson and Johnson, Mayer Laboratories, Inc. and Planned Parenthood Federation of America--have already agreed to the coalition's request. But the three largest condom manufacturers--Ansell Ltd., Church and Dwight Company, Inc., and SSL International plc--have reportedly balked, arguing that N-9 provides back-up protection against pregnancy if a condom breaks.

The WHO report, however, found that "there is no evidence that N-9-lubricated condoms provide any additional protection against pregnancy" or sexually transmitted diseases, compared with condoms that are lubricated with other products. Officials at the larger condom manufacturers did not immediately respond to calls seeking comment.

--Jordan Lite, assistant managing editor of Women's Enews.