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What are microbicides?



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Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada.

Microbicides are substances that can be put in the vagina or rectum before sex to reduce the risk of infection from HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Depending on the type, some microbicides will also help to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

Recently, you may have heard that the well-known spermicide nonoxynol-9 does not prevent the spread of HIV—and may even increase the risk. Fortunately, researchers are testing many other promising microbicides.

Are microbicides available now?

Not yet. But some experts believe that safe, effective microbicides could be available within five years. They may be sold as gels, creams, suppositories, films, sponges or vaginal rings.

How do microbicides work?

Microbicides prevent the spread of HIV by either killing the virus, blocking its entry into the body, and/or boosting the body's natural defence systems. Some microbicides may also prevent the spread of other STIs.

Some microbicides will be intended for vaginal use only, while others may also be safe for rectal use.

Why are microbicides important?

Vaginal microbicides will provide women and couples with a new way to protect themselves—and their partners—against infection from HIV and other STIs.

Around the world, almost half (43%) of all HIV infections are among women. Each year, 2.1 million women—more than 5,700 per day—become infected with HIV.

The leading cause of infection among women is having unprotected sex with a man. But it may be difficult, or even dangerous, for some women to insist that their partner use a condom. A woman may:

- believe that men have the right to make all decisions about sex

- be afraid of being ridiculed, rejected or punished by her partner
- have less power than her partner, or depend on him for food, shelter or money
- want to have children (or be forced to have children), or
- not have access to the information, support and resources she needs.

Microbicides will allow women to protect themselves without the knowledge or permission of their sexual partners. For example, a woman may use a microbicide if her partner will not use a condom, or if she doesn't want him to know that she is using protection.

Some microbicides may allow a woman to become pregnant (if she wants to) without risking infection from HIV and other STIs.

Making safe, low-cost microbicides available to women around the world could save millions of lives.

Will microbicides replace condoms in the future?

No. Using condoms properly will still be the best way to prevent infection from HIV and other STIs. But microbicides will be an option when a partner cannot—or will not—use condoms. Microbicides could also be used as “back up” protection, in case a condom breaks.

For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.

For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1
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