

Female Condom: *A Powerful Tool for Protection*

Millions of women and men worldwide need effective protection against HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unintended pregnancy. Expanding access to HIV treatment is critical but we must also expand access to prevention options, especially for those at highest risk—women and girls.

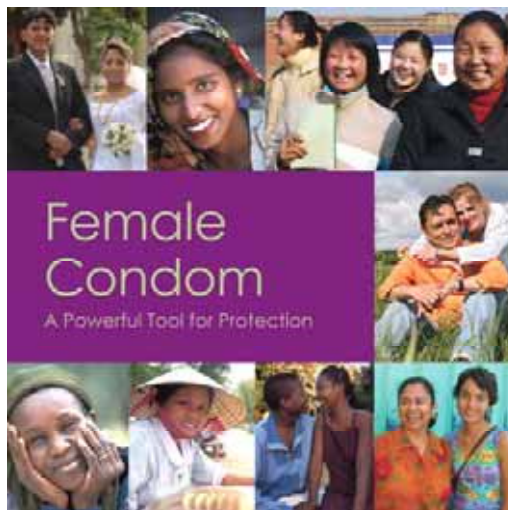
The female condom is a prevention technology that is available *now* to enable couples to reduce their risks. Research suggests that it is as effective as the male condom in preventing pregnancy and STIs. Access to female condoms can increase the proportion of couples having protected sex, offering a lifesaving alternative.

Is there a need for the female condom?

Yes. Effective alternatives to male condoms are critical to protecting women and couples from STIs and unintended pregnancy. Almost half of the 39 million adults infected with HIV worldwide are women—up from one-third in 1985. Women who learn to use female condoms can protect themselves even if their partners refuse to use male condoms. Strong female condom introduction programs can pave the way for future protection methods, such as microbicides, when they become available.

Does the female condom prevent transmission of STIs?

Yes. Evidence from laboratory and population-based studies shows female condoms are at least as effective as male condoms in preventing STIs. Studies in Kenya, Thailand, and the US found similar declines in STIs among women who were given male and female condoms and those given only male condoms. STI prevalence among sex workers in Madagascar fell by 13 percent after female condoms were added to a male condom distribution program.



PATH and UNFPA. *Female Condom A Powerful Tool for Protection*. Seattle: UNFPA and PATH, 2006. (<http://www.path.org/publications/pub.php?id=1267>)

Are female condoms effective in preventing STIs?

Yes. An estimate based on the female condom's effectiveness for pregnancy prevention suggests that a woman having sex with an HIV-infected partner could reduce her risk by more than 90 percent by using a female condom correctly and consistently during each act of sexual intercourse. Less consistent, typical use of male condoms is estimated to reduce HIV risk by 80 percent.

Does the female condom offer dual protection from pregnancy and STIs?

Yes. The female condom is the only available woman-initiated method of dual protection against STIs and pregnancy. Several studies, including a large World Health Organization (WHO) study in four countries, show that female condoms provide about the same protection from pregnancy as male condoms. Effectiveness rates for typical use among WHO study participants in China, Panama, and Nigeria ranged from 94 percent to 98 percent for female condoms and from 92 percent to 96 percent for male condoms.

Does the female condom have an impact on levels of protected sex?

Yes. Many studies show that providing female condoms as part of a comprehensive prevention strategy complements the male condom and results in increased levels of protection. Protected sex among women in studies in the United States and Brazil doubled after they received female condoms and counseling. Among Madagascar study participants, protected sex rose by 10 percent due to their use of female condoms.

Is the female condom cost-effective?

Yes. While female condoms are more expensive than male condoms, mathematical modeling has shown that when the female condom is offered as part of a well-planned STI and pregnancy prevention program, it is cost-effective. For example, one model estimated that use of 4 million female condoms in South Africa, at an estimated unit cost of US\$0.77 for product and program costs, would prevent 1,740 HIV infections, with a net savings to the health care system of about \$980,000.

Are there challenges to increasing access and use of the female condom?

Yes. Initial forecasts of uptake and impact may have been too optimistic, given the challenges of introducing a new product. For the female condom, these challenges include negative perceptions of barrier methods, cost, provider bias, and lack of support for large-scale programs. Such programs would offer opportunities for economies of scale in production, bringing the price of the method down, demonstrating the true public health impact of female condoms, and building a foundation for introduction of future methods.

Are there feasible strategies for increasing demand and access?

Yes. Increased promotion, wider distribution, better access to female condoms through comprehensive reproductive health and STI/HIV prevention programs, and reaching at-risk couples will

stimulate demand for female condoms and contribute to improved access. Consistent large sales and growing demand in Brazil and South Africa show what is possible with investments in programming.

Are there clear priorities for taking action now to increase access to and use of female condoms?

Yes. The female condom is poised for greater use and impact. The need for effective disease protection is great, and female condoms have the potential to protect the health of millions of couples worldwide.

Four key steps can make female condoms more accessible and available and prevent infections today:

- Develop greater political and social support locally, nationally, and internationally.
- Increase public and private investment in female condoms.
- Scale up promotion and evaluate impact.
- Conduct operations research within the context of increased programming.

Resources

The Global Consultation on the Female Condom
www.path.org/projects/womans_condom_gcfc2005.php

Prevention NOW Campaign
www.preventionnow.net

United Nations Population Fund
www.unfpa.org

Family Health International
www.fhi.org/en/Topics/femcondom.htm

Cervical Barriers Advancement Society
www.cervicalbarriers.org

The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS
www.womenandaids.unaids.org

The Female Health Company
www.femalehealth.com