

Female Condoms: The Best Kept Secret in Woman- Initiated HIV Prevention

Margaret R. Weeks, Ph.D.

In collaboration with

Michelle Corbett, MPH

**Institute for Community Research
Hartford, CT**



The Institute for
Community Research

**CIRA Conference: Women,
Power & HIV/AIDS, New
Haven, CT, April 6, 2006**

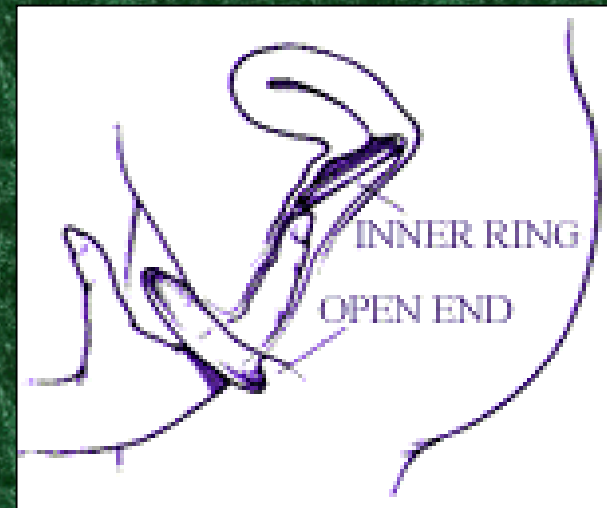
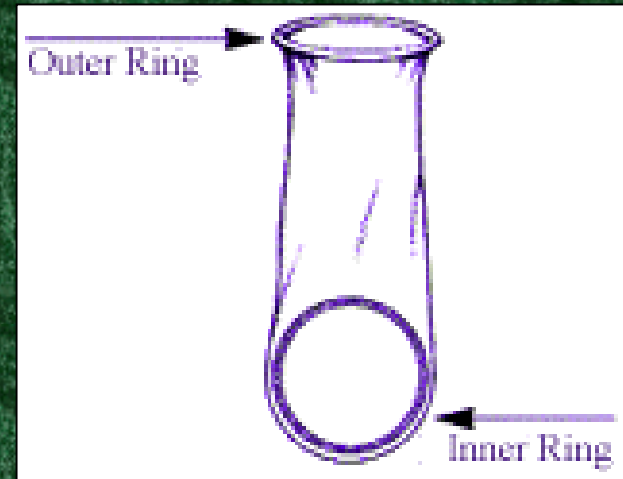
The Female Condom

Strong, loose-fitting 6 ½ in. polyurethane sheath with flexible rings at each end

The inner ring is used to insert and keep it in place

The outer ring is soft and remains on the outside of the vagina during sex

Protects the vagina, cervix and external genitalia



Overview

- **Polyurethane sheath is:**
 - stronger than latex
 - conducts heat
 - odourless
 - NO allergic reactions
- **No serious side effects - less than 10% of users report mild irritations**
- **Pre-lubricated with a silicone-based, non-spermicidal lubricant**



Acceptability Trials of Female Condoms

Zimbabwe (Kerrigan et al., 2000): when FC was promoted as a family planning product, overall consistency of use was only 15%, but 68% of women said they would use it again and 80% of men intended to use both MC and FC.

Thailand (Jivasak-Apimas et al, 2001): of 148 sex workers from sex establishments in 4 cities participating in a FC acceptability study, 68% found FC overall satisfactory.

Washington, DC (Klein et al., 1999): of 131 crack and/or injection drug using women in an HIV risk reduction intervention with FC introduction, 60% had favorable reactions to it and most of their partners preferred their experience with FC to use of MC

Costa Rica, Indonesia, Mexico, Senegal (Rivers et al., 1998): exploratory study of how FC introduction may enhance women's capacity to negotiate safer sex, FC introduction was found to be most successful among all couples who had difficulty using MC.

**Trials have been widespread globally;
but knowledge is still limited locally.**

How much do you know about the Female Condom?

TRUE or FALSE?

1. Female condoms are as effective as male condoms in protecting against HIV/STIs.

TRUE

Estimated to reduce the risk of HIV by 97%.

2. Female condoms can be inserted up to 8 hours before having sex.

TRUE

8 hours or 5 minutes, it's equally effective.

3. Female condoms must be fitted by a health care provider.

FALSE

No need for fitting or prescription.

Test Your Female Condom Knowledge

TRUE or FALSE?

4. The female condom can be used if women or their partners are allergic to latex.

TRUE

The polyurethane has virtually no side effects.

5. Use female condoms and male condoms at the same time for maximum protection.

FALSE

A common misconception; all you need is one.

6. Oil lubricants (like baby oil and Vaseline) can cause the FC to break.

FALSE

Oils do not break down the polyurethane.

Test Your Female Condom Knowledge

TRUE or FALSE?

Female condoms can be found in any local pharmacy, community health clinic, your doctor's office, and wherever male condoms can be found.

FALSE

So What's the Problem?

The Vicious Cycle:

- Many potential users are unaware of the female condom
- Providers don't carry or promote them or educate clients on their use
- Packaging does not include instructions
- Many who try them once or twice don't get past the initial problems without support
- Female condoms are expensive compared to male condoms; people don't like to buy them
- Pharmacies take them off shelves because they become outdated
- Those who want to use them can't find them

User Complaints

- **Relatively expensive**
- **Difficult to insert at first**
- **Reports of noise during sex**
- **Only one size**
- **Some discomfort caused by rings**
- **Penile misrouting possible**
- **Contraceptive**

Hartford Studies of Female Condom Acceptability/Use

- **Female Condom Use in High Risk Women as Predictor of Microbicide Readiness (Supplement, 2002-2003)**
 - In-depth interviews with 50 women and 50 men (not partners)
- **Sustained Female Condom Use in High-Risk Women to Prevent HIV (NIMH RO1 MH069088-01A2, 2004-2007)**
 - Survey with 186 (of 500) women conducted at intake, 1-month and 10-month
 - In-depth interviews with 16 (of 40) couples (interviewed separately)

Problems reported by women who *never* or *only once* used female condoms:

- **Unsuccessful Attempt at Insertion**

“I tried to use it a few times and it didn’t work so I didn’t use it no more. Cause I couldn’t get it in. I couldn’t get it to stay in. It came out. But if I ever figured out how to use it, that would be good.”

* * *

- **Negative First Experience**

E. “Why do you think you’ve never used it again?”

P. “I think it was because of that one experience...it was terrible.”

Problems reported by women who *never* or *only once* used female condoms:

- **Negative Peer Response**

“My best friend had told me about [FC] and she was just basically telling me about how weird they looked. She said she wouldn’t use them. She wouldn’t try them.”

- **Lack of Provider Support**

“I told her I didn’t know how to put them [FC] on. She told me she didn’t either.... She didn’t care to tell [me] the truth. She just went on to something else. She was like, ‘you should take the Depo’. And I told her it wasn’t about pregnancy and she said, ‘oh, you should use...the male condoms’.”

Reports by those who use the female condom *regularly or more than once*:

- “It was rough when I was trying to put it up there [the first time]. I had a little trouble with that, but once I got it up there it was fine.”
- “I like it better. I think it’s safer. I think it’s built better...I don’t care what it looks like, as long as it does what it’s supposed to.”
- “A female condom is good because you put it in there yourself and you know it’s in there and you know they [partner] can’t go down there and take it out.”

Reports by those who use the female condom *regularly or more than once*:

- “I trust the FC more because it’s harder to break.”
- “...it’s [MC] like a rubber band around [him]. [With FC] he don’t have to feel that around it... that’s what he likes. As long as he’s free, as long as it’s off of him.”
- “And plus,...they [partner] go soft and then you gotta get them back hard and all that stuff. So, it’s [FC] more convenient for me.”

Men's Perspectives

P: There's no bad things...It was a good thing. I used it and I was like wow, I didn't even know we had [FC]...Yeah, it felt 100% comfortable.

E: So, in comparing it to the male condom...

P: Oh, no it's uncomfortable, that's why a lot of people don't want to use it...It's real, real uncomfortable, but this one is real comfortable...If I can buy some, I would buy, I would let people know. As a matter of fact, I told my sister about the condom. I said, I'm going to tell you something real, you know, I'm sorry but I got to tell you this and I said, you don't want to use [MC], the male don't want to use it, you use it [FC], it's comfortable, you want some, I got some, I can give you some.

E: Okay. So would you use it again?

P: Yeah, we'll use it all the time if she wants to use it.

Latino male, age 30

Men's Perspectives

P: You know what, I see, what I think that should be changed is that you see more advertisement of male condoms. I think they should switch and put more women condoms out on the billboards or whatever, I think so.

E: Okay. That's a good point and why do you say that?

P: Because there's a lot of women out here that don't know that you can be protected by the female condom just as well as they say the male condoms, but a female condom is, to me, a lot more effective than the dudes. I think they should. You know, I don't care who promotes this but...Because everywhere you go, if you go to any, we got Trojans everywhere...But a female, you can't, you don't just go and see those...But, I think the women need to get more educated on this.

African American male, age 48

Reported Female Condom Use Over Time (Women)

	Intake (n=186)	1-Mo (n=155)	10-Mo (n=70)
Ever used FC:	34.0%	79.4%	78.6%
Used 2-10 times ever:	16.7%	53.7%	56.4%
Used 11 or more times ever:	8.1%	9.8%	14.5%
Got a FC but didn't use it:	10.8%	11.6%	5.7%
Tried FC, decided not to use:	5.9%	19.4%	32.9%
Use occasionally as backup:	11.3%	20.0%	15.7%
Use FC regularly as an option:	3.2%	6.5%	14.3%
Use FC as primary method:	3.8%	7.7%	2.9%

***How can we
increase the use of
the Female
Condom?***

Increase Female Condom *Awareness*

- **Educate colleagues and peers**
- **Discuss personal HIV vulnerability/risk**
- **Distribute or leave out female condom and brochures**
- **Emphasize female condom as dual protection method**
- **Present female condom as part of “method mix”**
- **Involve men!!**

Increase Female Condom *Ability*

- **Become skilled**
- **Know how to troubleshoot**
- **Demonstrate proper FC use**
- **Include instructions for use w/ FC**
- **Emphasize practice and patience**
- **Train clients in effective communication and negotiation skills**

Increase Female Condom Access

- Provide free or subsidized FC
- Advocate for wider public and private sector distribution



Summary

The Female Condom is NOT for everybody
and it is NOT a cure all

BUT...

The Female Condom IS
*an effective option
that with community support
can become a viable alternative
for more women and men at risk.*

Product information & training materials

<http://www.femalehealth.com>

Re-use guidelines

<http://www.reusefemalecondom.org>

Purchasing female condoms in bulk:

The Female Health Co.

515 N. State St. #2225

Chicago, IL 60610

312-595-9123

1,000 FC/\$1,100

Global Protection CT

800-969-7353

100/\$129

1,000/\$1,100

Safety Works

914-698-3631

100/\$127

The Hartford, CT Study of Sustained Female Condom Use in High-Risk Women

INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Maryann Abbott, M.A., Project Director

Evelyn Baez, MA, Project Coordinator

A. Michelle Corbett, Ethnographer

Julia Dickson-Gomez, Ph.D., Co-Principal Investigator

Jianghong Li, Ph.D., Research Associate

Mary Prince, Outreach Interviewer

Jennifer Salonia, Outreach Interviewer

Margaret R. Weeks, Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Yale University

•Laurie Novick Sylla, MHSA*, Co-Principal Investigator

FUNDER: NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

An affiliated project of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS

Contact Information:

Institute for Community Research
2 Hartford Square West, Suite 100
Hartford, CT 06106

860-278-2044

mweeks@icrweb.org

www.incommunityresearch.org