



## Basic Facts on Female Condoms

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The female condom is a currently existing and approved safer sex technology that can be used to prevent both HIV infection and/or unintended pregnancy. Correct and consistent use of female condoms can reduce the risk of HIV infection by more than 90 percent in women having sex with an infected partner. Studies show that the female condom is at least as effective as the male condom in reducing the risk of contracting other sexually transmitted infections. Female condoms also can be used to prevent unintended pregnancies, making them an ideal “dual protection” method.

The female condom has high rates of acceptability. Research conducted in more than 40 countries has revealed acceptability rates ranging from 37 percent to 96 percent among individuals of varied ages, social and economic status, and sexual history. Many women like the female condom because it gives them greater control in negotiating safer sex, is easy to use, and can increase their own and their partner’s sexual pleasure. Some studies have shown that, because the inner ring can cause additional stimulation for men during intercourse, many men find that female condoms increase their sexual pleasure, thereby enhancing their acceptability among partners seeking to practice safer sex. The outer ring of the female condom can also increase extra-vaginal stimulation for women.

Access to female condoms increases the share of safer sex acts. Female condoms increase the rate of safer sex in several key ways. First, they provide a protection method for women whose partners refuse to use a male condom. Second, they increase the range of options available to couples already using male condoms, and help alleviate “condom fatigue.” Studies show that when delivered through effective programs that provide training in the correct and consistent use of female condoms and in partner communication, female condom use leads to higher usage rates for both male and female condoms—i.e. an increase in protected sex acts overall. In studies in Brazil and the United States, the number of protected sex acts doubled after participants received female condoms and counseling.

Female condoms are in demand by many populations. Access to female condoms expands the range of options available to HIV-positive people seeking to avoid unintended pregnancy or re-infection through unprotected sex, or to protect their uninfected partners. They also expand the choices available to gay men, men who have sex with men, and bisexual and transgender persons—providing a benefit to all people seeking to engage in safer sex. Indeed, while the method is commonly referred to as a “female” condom, and generally presented as a method of protection for vaginal intercourse, the same sheath is frequently used for anal intercourse by both heterosexual couples and men who have sex with men. Increased access to this method therefore increases the choices for many individuals at risk of unprotected sex.

There are currently available products. Today, one product, produced by the U.S.-based Female Health Company (FHC) and often referred to as the FC1, has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and approved by the World Health Organization (WHO) for inclusion in the UNFPA list of essential products recommended for prevention programs. The FC1 consists of a polyurethane sheath that is far more durable than a latex condom because it does not deteriorate in the conditions of high heat and humidity common to many countries in Africa and Asia, and because it can be used with oil-based lubricants if and when needed.

A second-generation product, FC2, also produced by FHC, is now under review by WHO. This product, made of a latex derivative known as nitrile,<sup>1</sup> represents an advance over the previous version because it retains many of the same properties, but can be produced at a lower cost. As of this writing, WHO's product decision on FC2 is expected sometime in 2006.

Numerous other barrier methods, including a variety of other female condoms, cervical caps, and diaphragms (some originally used for preventing unintended pregnancy) are undergoing acceptability and effectiveness research and may soon be available. (See [www.preventionnow.net](http://www.preventionnow.net) for an overview of these products.) A number of microbicial products also are in various stages of research, testing, and product development. The Prevention Now! Web site will include a description of all current and pending products as the products come on the market or new information becomes available.

Despite these benefits, female condoms remain largely inaccessible. Despite the female condom's potential for reducing the spread of HIV and the number of unintended pregnancies among those wishing to space or limit births, this method remains largely inaccessible to the vast majority of people worldwide who might seek to use it. In 2005, for example, only 14 million female condoms were distributed to women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—just one for every 98 women between the ages of 15 and 49.

Access is limited by both unsubstantiated biases and by the high cost per unit. Common myths about the female condom include the assumptions that “women don't like them,” “men don't like them,” “they make too much noise,” and “people won't use them.” These biases have been consistently refuted by field research, yet are constantly perpetuated through word of mouth, even among professionals in the HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health fields.

These biases and existing cost factors—along with a growing effort by fundamentalist groups to undermine all programs and technologies that enable people to engage in safer sex—have contributed to failures by governments and donor agencies to make this essential protection method more available. Unlike many other new reproductive and sexual health technologies, the female condom has not yet had a sustained international effort to ensure the public sector bulk purchases needed to drive down the cost of procurement and introduction at the country level. Public sector funds can make people more aware of the female condom, increase accessibility, and further acceptability, all of which contribute to making the female condom more available to the people who need it. The benefits to the consumer, and in turn to public health and human rights, are inestimable.

For more information on  
Female condoms  
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Success stories, case studies, research, country campaigns  
and other information

Visit [www.preventionnow.net](http://www.preventionnow.net)

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<sup>1</sup> Nitrile is a latex-derivative, but does not have the allergenic properties of latex. It is also resistant to oil-based products and can, therefore, be used with oil-based lubricants.