

# The Female Condom

## What is the Female Condom?

The female condom is used to protect against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. The female condom, like the male condom, is worn during sexual intercourse, providing a barrier to prevent the exchange of body fluids between sexual partners. While the male condom is made of latex and worn on the penis, the female condom is worn by the woman and is made of polyurethane, a soft, thin plastic. The female condom has two rings, one on each end, connected by a sheath of this plastic. The inner ring of the condom, which is sealed closed, is inserted into the vagina. The outer ring, which provides an opening for the penis to enter the vagina, remains outside the body, covering the external genital area. The female condom is not a replacement for the male condom, rather it is an additional option that couples can choose from when seeking means of protection. Female condoms can help women control how and when safe sex occurs. Although the female condom does not eliminate the need for sexual communication and negotiation between partners, it does provide women with a method of protection that can give them more control over their reproductive health.

## The effectiveness of female condoms

Studies have shown that when female and male condoms are both available:

the rate of unprotected sex declines



there is a decrease in the rate of sexually transmitted infections

## Why is a female controlled method of protection so important?

**Biological Vulnerability:** Women's and girls' vulnerability to HIV infection is four times greater than that of men and boys. This is due in part to the fact that the vagina has four times the exposed area as the penis, creating more possible pathways for HIV transmission. Due to this increased vulnerability, women and girls have a greater need to protect themselves from HIV.

**Power Imbalance:** Due to many social and economic power imbalances, women may not have the power to insist that their sexual partner wear a condom. Additionally, women and girls who engage in sex as a means of income may not be able to negotiate safe sex at all. Although female condoms may not eliminate the need for sexual negotiation, they are worn by women and may be controlled by women.

**Unless sold to users at a subsidised price, female condoms can cost up to 20 times more than male condoms**

*Female condoms can be too expensive for most people. Due to the fact that polyurethane is more expensive than latex, the cost of female condoms is far greater than male condoms.*

Male condom = \$

Female condom = \$

Source: University of California San Francisco. *Female condom proves cost-effective in prevention of HIV in Africa.* Press release, July 10, 2000.

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## Differences between female and male condoms

*The female condom is not a replacement for the male condom. Rather, the female condom provides an additional option for couples. The male and female condoms **cannot** be used at the same time. Couples should determine which form of protection best fits their needs and accessibility.*

### The Female condom . . .

- can be controlled by women and girls.
- is worn on the inside of the vagina.
- is made of polyurethane plastic (stronger and more durable than latex).
- can be stored almost anywhere because it is not easily harmed by excess heat.
- can be inserted hours prior to or just before sexual intercourse.
- does not need to be withdrawn immediately after sex.
- is lubricated on the inside.
- can be used with both water-based and oil-based lubricants.
- covers the external genital area of the female as well as the base of the penis. This added coverage can help protect both sexual partners from a variety of STIs.
- should be used only once, but trials are underway to determine the feasibility of multiple use.

### The Male condom . . .

- is not always under the control of women.
- is worn on the penis.
- is made of latex (less expensive than polyurethane and more widely available).
- must be stored away from the sun or excess heat, to avoid damage.
- must be placed on an erect penis immediately before intercourse
- must be removed immediately after male ejaculation.
- is lubricated on the outside.
- must be used only with water-based lubricants.
- covers the penis and internal female genitals only.
- can only be used once.

## Future additional female controlled methods

In the future, women and girls may have other means of STI/HIV protection that they can control. Such protection may come in the form of microbicides, substances that, when inserted into the vagina or rectum, may help to prevent sexual transmission of HIV by killing or inactivating the virus. A microbicide which could be used by women without the consent (and possibly without the knowledge) of their male partners would be an important tool for HIV/AIDS prevention, particularly when women are reluctant or unable to discuss safer sex with their partners. These microbicides are currently being developed and are not yet available. Because microbicides must pass through many tests to make sure that they are effective against HIV and safe for women who use them, it may be several years before they are widely available.