



# Female Condom

A Powerful Tool for Protection



## About this document

After more than ten years on the market and despite the clear need, the supply and adoption of female condoms is low—significantly below the levels needed to have an impact on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. More than 100 experts from 15 countries met in Baltimore, Maryland, in September 2005 at the Global Consultation on the Female Condom (GCFC) to discuss the status of the female condom worldwide and to develop a plan of action to build support for the method.<sup>1</sup> A key goal of this plan is to gather the support of donors, policymakers, and women's health advocates worldwide to make the case for immediate, widespread promotion and distribution of female condoms as an important way to protect women, men, families, and communities around the world. This document answers key questions about the female condom and builds on the momentum created at the GCFC by presenting evidence of the female condom's effectiveness and impact, identifying current challenges to wider use, and indicating the steps that need to be taken now to develop strong female condom programs worldwide.

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# Broad support from the global health community

“Female condoms are of enormous importance to the fight against AIDS because they are the only existing, effective female-controlled preventive tool against HIV and other STIs. However, their use has remained frustratingly and tragically low, despite growing demand from women themselves. The barriers of price and supply must be overcome. Female condoms must be brought within the reach of all women as a core part of the world’s commitment to moving towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support.”

— Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS

“The female condom works. It is effective in preventing pregnancy and STIs, including HIV. When it is offered with good counseling and support, female condom availability results in significantly safer sex ... More choice equals more protection. It’s that simple. Increased choice helps to empower women. As part of a rights-based approach to health care, women should by right have access to female condoms.”

— Dr. Steve Sinding, Director General,  
International Planned Parenthood Federation

“We must increase access to female-controlled methods of prevention to ensure that women have life-saving tools, such as female condoms.”

— Dr. Thoraya Obaid, Executive Director, UNFPA

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# Overview

Millions of couples worldwide need effective protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, and pregnancy. Treatment and care efforts are expanding worldwide, but they cannot keep up with the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially among women and girls. The female condom is an effective STI and pregnancy prevention technology available now that enables couples to reduce their risks. Research shows that the method is comparable to the male condom in its effectiveness in preventing pregnancy and STIs. Access to the female condom can increase the proportion of couples having protected sex and offers a lifesaving alternative when male condoms are not used.



Although female condoms have been introduced in many countries, their supply and uptake in countries hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic is woefully inadequate. In 2005, only 14 million female condoms were available for distribution, while 6 to 9 billion male condoms were provided worldwide. Greater investment by the private and public sectors and support from the donor community are urgently needed to make the female condom an affordable option. While new female condom products being developed offer more choice and may overcome some of the problems reported by current users, these products face financial and regulatory barriers that slow their path to market. Advocacy for the female condom, from the community level upwards, is needed to stimulate demand and increase access and availability. Research that provides more data on the method's impact and cost-effectiveness will help promote the female condom.

The female condom is not a promise on the horizon, but an effective, female-initiated method available now that can protect women from pregnancy and STIs. It is an important technology that needs to be given a more prominent role in reproductive health programs and included in STI/HIV and pregnancy prevention efforts worldwide.



# UNPRECEDENTED NEED

## Is there a need for the female condom?



**Yes.** The need for effective alternatives to the male condom is critical to protect women and couples from STIs and unintended pregnancy.

Millions of women worldwide suffer from STIs—all of which are preventable, but many of which are not curable. Almost half of the 39 million adults around the world infected with HIV are women—up from about one-third in 1985.<sup>2,3</sup> Young women are most at risk. Half of all new HIV infections occur in young people (15 to 24 years old). Other STIs also take a toll worldwide, and some can make those infected more vulnerable to HIV infection. According to the latest World Health Organization (WHO) estimates, 340 million new cases of curable STIs occur every year.

Biology, gender roles, sexual norms, and inequalities in access to resources and decision-making power put women and girls at greater risk of infection than men and boys. Many women have insufficient information about sexual and reproductive health and do not understand the risks associated with their own or their partners' sexual behaviors. Many of those who do recognize their vulnerability are powerless to protect themselves. Women who receive information and counseling, and who learn to use the female condom, can protect themselves even if their partners refuse to use a male condom.

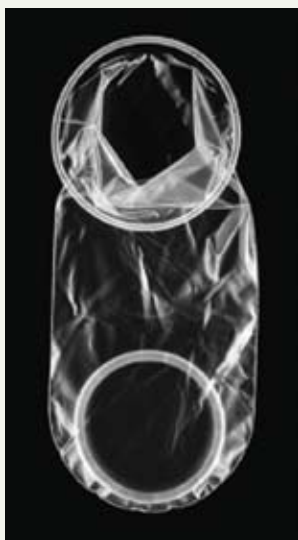


“A place for female condoms?  
It is not whether there is a place  
but WHAT is the place?”<sup>4</sup>

— UK Department for International  
Development Health Advisor in China

The need for effective options to protect women’s health and future fertility is urgent. Currently, the only protective methods against STIs are the male and the female condom. Since the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the female condom is the only new technology developed and approved that protects against STIs (see box). Not only can effective female condom programs help women and

couples reduce their risks for diseases and unintended pregnancies now, strong introduction programs can also help pave the way for the introduction of other new protection methods, such as cervical barriers and microbicides, which will become available in the next decade.



## The female condom

The most widely distributed female condom, the FC Female Condom<sup>®</sup>, is the only female condom currently approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and distributed by major donor agencies.<sup>5</sup> It is a soft, strong, transparent polyurethane sheath about the same length as a male condom, but with flexible rings at both ends. It can be inserted into the vagina several hours prior to sexual intercourse and can remain in place after ejaculation. It provides a protective barrier between the penis and the cervix, the vagina, and parts of the external female genitalia. Polyurethane is a thin, odorless material that transfers heat better than latex. The female condom is prelubricated with a silicone-based, non-spermicidal lubricant. It has a shelf life of five years.

Studies show that some women like the female condom because it gives them greater control over safe-sex negotiation, is effective for STI and pregnancy prevention, is easy to use, increases sexual pleasure, and is a good option for men who do not like male condoms. However, other women report dissatisfaction with the female condom because of discomfort during sex, the need to get a partner’s consent, difficulties in use, aesthetic concerns, noise, sensitivity to polyurethane, and/or cost. New female condom designs that address these problems are being developed. A new condom from the Female Health Company, FC2, may be available in 2006; other new designs are several years away.

FC Female Condom is a registered trademark of Female Health Company.

PROTECTION FOR ALL

## Can all women use the female condom?



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