



# SHARP FACTS

## Female Condom



### Introduction

With nearly 1 million Americans infected with HIV, most of them through sexual transmission, and an estimated 15 million cases of other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) occurring each year in the United States, effective strategies for preventing these diseases are critical.



Refraining from having sexual intercourse with an infected partner is the best way to prevent transmission of HIV and other STDs. But for those who have sexual intercourse, latex condoms are highly effective when used consistently and correctly. The correct and consistent use of latex condoms during sexual intercourse - vaginal, anal, or oral - can greatly reduce a person's risk of acquiring or transmitting STDs, including HIV infection. In fact, recent studies provide compelling evidence that latex condoms are highly effective in protecting against HIV infection when used for every act of intercourse.

### Why a female condom?

In the U.S., **women** account for 26% of new AIDS cases reported in the most recent period according to the CDC. Women of color are particularly affected accounting for 64% of all new HIV infections. Latinas account for 18%. In one study, half of the pregnancies in Navy women were unplanned, and half of these women were not using any form of birth control.<sup>2</sup> Because of economic, social, and gender inequalities, **women have not always been able to successfully negotiate male condom use** with their partners.<sup>3</sup> For some women, female condoms may be an option for them to protect themselves from sexually transmitted disease, HIV, and unwanted pregnancy.

### What is the female condom?

The female condom is made of polyurethane, a soft, thin plastic which is stronger than the latex used to manufacture most male condoms. The female condom is lubricated and disposable. The lubricant is non-spermicidal. It has a 5-year shelf life and is resistant to the deleterious effects of heat and humidity. The female condom fits loosely in the vagina and has a soft ring at each end. The ring at the closed end is used to put the device inside the vagina and to hold it in place during sex. The other ring (open end) stays outside the vagina.



### Will a female condom Protect Me?

One study of this condom as a contraceptive indicates a failure rate of 21-26 percent in 1 year among typical users; for those who use the female condom correctly and consistently, the rate was approximately 5 percent. Unlike the male condom, the female condom protects the external female genitalia because its outer edge remains outside the vagina during sex - resulting in less skin-to-skin contact.

According to the Female Health Company: "One calculation of the risk of STD transmission estimates a 97.1% reduction in the risk of HIV infection with correct and consistent use of the female condom. Results of reliability studies show that the breakage rate for the female condom is substantially lower than the breakage rate for the

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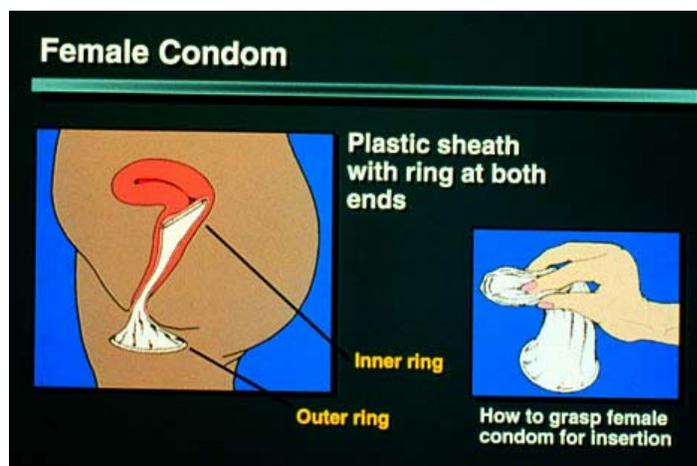
## Female Condom™

male latex condom. When the female condom is used consistently and correctly, the accidental pregnancy rate is similar to, or lower than, rates for the diaphragm, cervical cap, and contraceptive sponge. The polyurethane female condom does not produce skin irritation, allergic reactions, or vaginal trauma nor does it alter the vaginal flora.”<sup>4</sup>

### How Do I Use a female condom ?

The female condom can be inserted up to eight hours before sex begins. The woman inserts the female condom with her fingers, much like a tampon with no applicator.

- Prior to inserting the condom into the vagina, ensure the condom is completely lubricated on the outside and the inside.
- While holding the sheath at the closed end, grasp the soft, flexible inner ring and squeeze it with your thumb and middle finger so it becomes long and narrow. With the other hand, separate the outer lips of your vagina.
- Gently insert the inner ring into the vaginal canal. You should feel the inner ring go up and move into place. Next, place your index finger on the inside of the condom, and push the inner ring up as far as it will go. Be sure the sheath is not twisted. The outer ring remains outside of the vagina. The female condom is now in place and ready for use.
- Gently guide the penis into the sheath's opening to ensure that it enters properly. Be sure that the penis is not entering to the side of the sheath.
- To remove the condom, twist the outer ring and gently pull the condom out. Do this before standing up, to avoid any spillage. Throw the condom out in the garbage.
- *Use more lubricant* if: the penis does not move freely; the outer ring is pushed inside; you feel the female condom when it is in place; or the female condom comes out of the vagina during use.
- *Remove and insert a new female condom* if: the female condom rips or tears during insertion or use; the outer ring is pushed inside; the penis enters outside the pouch; the female condom bunches inside the vagina; or you have sex again.<sup>4</sup>



**Where can I buy female condoms?** The Female Health Company, the only manufacturer of the female condom, has an on-line index of stores that sell this product at <http://www.femalehealth.com>

**Where can I get more information?** Your medical care provider should be consulted if you think you may have been exposed to any sexually transmitted disease. CDC provides information through their National STD Hotline at (800) 227-8922. For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program Home Page at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

1 - CDC, HIV-AIDS Surveillance Report, Vol. 11 No. 1, page 3, June 1999

2 - *Pregnancy and Single Parenthood in the Navy: Results of a 1997 Survey*, TR-98-6, page vii, Navy Personnel Research and Development Center, Sep 1998

3 - Gilbert L., *The Female Condom in the U.S., Lessons Learned*, American Journal of Public Health, insert, Vol. 89, No. 6, page 6, June 1999

4 - Female Health Co., <http://www.femalehealth.com/>, as of 29 Mar 2000