

# Microbicides: *Take Action* for this New Hope for HIV Prevention



HIV is a serious and growing women's health issue globally. Right now, half of the world's HIV/AIDS-infected people are women. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 61 percent of all adults living with HIV/AIDS are women, and in hard-hit nations such as Zambia, girls are five times more likely than boys to be HIV positive.

Biologically, women are two to four times more vulnerable than men to sexually transmitted HIV infection. Their vulnerability increases due to their lack of economic and social power in many societies, where women often cannot control sexual encounters or insist on protective measures such as abstinence or mutual monogamy. Many women who get infected with HIV have only one partner – their husbands. This trend is lethal to women, devastating to families and puts children at risk.

Women need HIV-prevention tools that they can control to safeguard their health and that of their families and communities. One of the most promising prevention tools is microbicides. Once developed, microbicides and vaccines would serve as complementary prevention technologies, with microbicides putting the power of prevention directly in women's hands.

## What is a Microbicide?

Microbicides (mī-KRO'-bī-sīdz) are a new class of products under development that a woman could use vaginally to protect herself and her partner from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. A microbicide could be produced in many forms: a gel, cream, sponge, or intra-vaginal ring that could be used for months at a time.

Products are in development that work in one of several ways: by killing or otherwise immobilising pathogens; blocking infection by creating a barrier between the pathogen and its target cells; or preventing the infection from taking hold after it has entered the body.

## Why do we need Microbicides?

With 6,800 new HIV infections occurring globally each day, new prevention strategies are desperately needed. While microbicides are not a magic bullet, researchers believe they could prevent millions of infections. And with leading scientists concluding that a vaccine is likely to be at least 10 years away, we need to make a strong commitment to developing microbicides.

Scientists estimate that even a 60 percent effective microbicide could prevent 2.5 million HIV infections in three years among women, men and children in the developing world.

## Where are we now?

Scientists are currently testing over 50 compounds to determine whether they will help to protect against HIV and/or other STIs. Of those, 11 are in clinical trials that will assess their safety for human use, and three are in large-scale trials enrolling thousands of women to assess their effectiveness against HIV. If one of these leads proves to be effective, a microbicide could be ready for distribution in a handful of countries within 2 to 3 years. If the current set of products does not prove effective, the time horizon will be longer (although there are several second-generation leads already in human testing).

## Why is public investment needed?

Microbicides are a public health good – a product offering huge social benefits but for which economic incentives to private investment are low. Despite the potential market size, neither pharmaceutical nor major biotech companies have made significant financial investments in the field because development is costly and the likelihood of finding an effective product is unknown. Like other public health goods, such as vaccines, public funding must fill the gap left by market failure.

As with any pharmaceutical or health care product, the key to developing safe, effective, affordable and accessible microbicides is sufficient investment. If we are to realise the promise of microbicides and the lifesaving properties they may provide, then additional public funding must be made available for research and development.

## How can you help?

Since microbicide research depends on government leadership and investment, public support is vital. Through the Global Campaign for Microbicides, people around the world are working in their own communities to demand safe and effective user-controlled HIV prevention tools. There are several things you, and your organisation, can do starting today to help make microbicides a reality:

- *Join your local campaign.* Go to <http://www.global-campaign.org/regionalactivities.htm> to find out if there is a microbicides coalition in your country or region.
- *Sign up for our monthly e-newsletter, GC News.* Sign up to receive our monthly e-newsletter and find additional information: [www.global-campaign.org/gcnews.htm](http://www.global-campaign.org/gcnews.htm)
- *Host a talk on microbicides.* Urge community groups, organisations and service providers in your community to host a free introduction to microbicides. We are happy to work with you on organising those programmes and finding presenters for you. Short presentations and scripts are also available at [www.global-campaign.org/download.htm](http://www.global-campaign.org/download.htm)
- *Sign the GC petition and help collect signatures.* You can obtain a copy at [www.global-campaign.org/download.htm](http://www.global-campaign.org/download.htm)
- *Learn more about microbicides.* Visit the Global Campaign website to read more about the economics, science, and advocacy for microbicides and other female controlled HIV prevention options.
- *Host a launch of our new film.* You can order our new film, *In Women's Hands*, for a small fee at [www.global-campaign.org/film.htm](http://www.global-campaign.org/film.htm)
- *Talk to your legislators about microbicides.* Write, email, call, or visit your members of Parliament or legislators and ask them to support microbicide research and development. Learn more at <http://www.global-campaign.org/legislativeadvocacy.htm>
- *Endorse the Global Campaign.* Currently, over 300 endorsers organisations worldwide are working together under the Global Campaign umbrella. There are no fees involved in endorsing or participating in the Campaign. In fact, the Campaign can supply you with training, materials and speakers at no cost to help you educate your community about microbicides.

The Global Campaign for Microbicides is a broad based, international coalition of organisations working to accelerate access to new HIV prevention options. Visit our website: [www.global-campaign.org](http://www.global-campaign.org) or email: [info@global-campaign.org](mailto:info@global-campaign.org) to get in touch with one of our regional offices:

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