

Microbicides

What is a microbicide?

A “microbicide” is any substance that can substantially reduce transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when applied either in the vagina or rectum. Like today’s spermicides, microbicides could be produced in many forms, such as gels, creams, suppositories, films, or in the form of a sponge or a vaginal ring that slowly releases the active ingredient over time.

How would a microbicide work?

Scientists are presently exploring three different approaches to microbicide development. Among these are substances that:

- 1) kill or otherwise immobilize STI pathogens
- 2) block infection by creating a barrier between the pathogen and the vagina or rectum
- 3) prevent the infection from taking hold after it has entered the body.

Would a microbicide eliminate the need for condoms?

No. When used consistently and correctly, condoms are likely to provide better protection against HIV and STIs, so they will still be promoted along with microbicides. But for people who cannot or will not use a condom and particularly for women whose partners refuse condoms, using microbicides can save lives and have a substantial impact on the epidemic.

What if a woman wants to get pregnant?

Some of the microbicides being investigated prevent pregnancy and some do not. Women’s groups have argued persuasively that it is important to have non-contraceptive microbicides in addition to one that prevents pregnancy, so that women and couples can protect their health and still have children. This is not possible with condoms.

Would men benefit from a microbicide as well?

There is every reason to believe that a microbicide would provide for both partners (bi-directional protection). Microbicides are also being tested for rectal use.

Would people living with HIV/AIDS benefit from a microbicide as well?

Microbicides could help prevent infections from STIs, prevent re-infection with different strains of HIV, and provide protection in sero-discordant couples.

When will microbicides be available?

Given the number of products currently available for testing, with strong advocacy from communities to encourage public sector investment in microbicides research, a partially effective microbicide could be on the market by 2010.

What can you do?

The Microbicides Advocacy Group Network (MAG-Net) is a Canadian coalition affiliated with the Global Campaign for Microbicides. Coordinated by the Canadian AIDS Society, it serves as a forum for the strategic development of advocacy efforts on microbicides in Canada, and a forum for the exchange of information among community advocates. Contact CAS to join.