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FEMALE CONDOM

What is a Female Condom?

The female condom helps protect partners from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. It is the only female-controlled device offering this protection. A female condom is a thin, loose-fitting and flexible plastic tube worn inside the vagina. A soft ring at the closed end of the tube covers the cervix during intercourse and holds it inside the vagina. Another ring at the open end of the tube stays outside the vagina and partly covers the lip area. A female condom provides a barrier between partners to prevent sharing bodily fluids like semen, blood, or saliva. This helps ensure that sexually transmitted infections are not passed and pregnancy does not occur. Female condoms are 79-95% percent effective.

Use

Female condoms can be inserted up to 8 hours before intercourse and are only effective when placed prior to intercourse. At first, female condoms can be awkward to use, but they are easy with practice. Take your time and try inserting the condom before sexual play. You can stand with one foot up on a chair, sit with your knees apart, or lie down. Lubrication can help keep the condom in place and lessen noise during intercourse.

A female condom and a male condom should not be used at the same time. After sex play, throw away the condom and **DO NOT REUSE** it.

Intercourse

To insert the condom, squeeze the ring at the closed end of the tube. Use one hand to spread the outer lips, and insert the squeezed condom into the vaginal canal. The inner ring should be pushed just past the pubic bone and over the cervix.

After insertion, make sure the condom is not twisted. About one inch of the open end will stay outside the body. The outer ring of the female condom will need to be held in place during intercourse, but may increase female stimulation. After intercourse, squeeze and twist the outer ring to keep all fluids, including sperm, inside the condom. Gently pull it out and throw it away.

Oral Sex

Female condoms can be used as dental dams to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections during oral sex. Cut off the closed end of the condom and down the side. This will give you a rectangular sheet. Place the sheet over the genitals or over a partner's mouth. Be careful to keep any areas of contact fully covered by the condom during oral sex. After oral sex, throw away the condom.

Your Health

There are no physical side effects associated with the use of female condoms. However, there is a chance that a female condom could break or slip during sex. If this occurs, women may consider taking Emergency Contraception or the "Morning After" Pill.

Availability

In the US, female condoms are sold over-the-counter and are available in most drugstores. If you cannot find them locally, you can buy them on the internet.

The United Nation's HIV/AIDS prevention program recognizes the importance and effectiveness of the female condom and is working to make it available globally.

Advantages

- ◆ Prevents the spread of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS.
- ◆ Protects the vagina and vulva.
- ◆ Does not reduce a male partner's stimulation.
- ◆ Available without a prescription.
- ◆ No hormonal side effects.
- ◆ Can be used by people with latex sensitivities.
- ◆ Prelubricated and can be used with oil and water-based lubricants.
- ◆ Can be inserted before sex play begins.
- ◆ Insertion can be part of sex play.
- ◆ Erection not necessary to keep condom in place.
- ◆ Does not affect future fertility.

Disadvantages

- ◆ Noticeable during sex.
- ◆ Sometimes difficult to insert or use.
- ◆ Does not contain spermicide.
- ◆ Can break or leak.
- ◆ About three times more expensive than male condoms.

Emergency Contraception

Pregnancy can be prevented *after* intercourse by taking Emergency Contraceptive pills (EC). Plan B and some brands of regular birth control pills can be used for EC. EC can be taken within 120 hours after unprotected intercourse to prevent pregnancy. It works by giving the body a short, high, burst of synthetic hormones that disrupts hormone patterns needed for pregnancy. In Washington State you can request EC directly from a pharmacist. To find the EC provider closest to you, call the nationwide **EC Hotline** at **1-800-584-9911**, 24 hours a day in English and Spanish or visit their website at www.NOT-2-LATE.com.

Your Cervix

The cervix is the opening to the uterus where menstrual blood, babies, and sperm pass. It is also the opening through which abortions are performed. Many birth control methods, including the female condom, diaphragm, and cervical cap, work by covering the cervix and preventing sperm from entering the uterus. Other birth control methods use hormones to change the mucus around the cervix, making the opening itself more resistant to sperm. Hormonal methods include oral contraceptives, and Depo Provera.

Women's bodies also naturally produce hormones that change the appearance of the cervix during a menstrual cycle. Women can learn more about the cervix by performing self-exams and watching these changes take place. For more information on how to perform a self-exam, pick up a brochure from the clinic and ask your clinician. She/he can give you a speculum and some instructions.

Further Resources

Cedar River Clinics: www.CedarRiverClinics.org

Contraception and Sex Information You Can Actually Use: <http://www.io.com/~wwomen/contraception/>

Female Health Company (Manufacturer's Site): <http://www.femalehealth.com>

Our Bodies, Ourselves, for the New Century. Boston Women's Health Book Collective, new version in 2005. <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org>

Feminist Women's Health Center at www.FWHC.org and <http://www.Birth-Control-Comparison.info>