



## Why Microbicides for Women?

**Microbicides would empower women to protect their own health.** Microbicides are products being developed as vaginal rings and gels to help prevent transmission of HIV to women during sex with an HIV-positive male partner. Microbicides are based on the same types of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs that are already being used successfully to treat HIV and to prevent mother-to-child transmission. The latest research shows that ARVs can prevent HIV in women when they are used consistently.

### Women and Girls Bear the Burden of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic

**HIV/AIDS is the world's leading cause of death in women ages 15-44.**<sup>i</sup> Fifty percent of all adults living with HIV/AIDS are women. The epidemic takes a disproportionate toll in sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly six out of every 10 HIV-positive adults are women.<sup>ii</sup>

**New HIV infections among women and girls continue at an alarming rate.** Each day, nearly 3,000 women and girls become infected with HIV/AIDS.<sup>iii</sup> An IPM incidence study conducted in South Africa found that in some areas of the KwaZulu-Natal province HIV prevalence among women ages 18-35 reaches higher than 40 percent.<sup>iv</sup>

In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, **women** ages 15-24 are **twice as likely** to be infected with HIV **as men** in the same age group.<sup>v</sup>

**Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection.** Heterosexual sex remains the primary mode of HIV transmission in sub-Saharan Africa, and a mix of biology and gender inequality renders women more susceptible to HIV infection than men.

**Marriage is not a refuge from the epidemic.** Many new HIV infections occur in married women and women in long-term relationships. More married and widowed women in Kenya are HIV positive than those who have never married.<sup>v</sup> In Zambia, 60 percent of people infected with HIV through heterosexual transmission acquired the virus while married or living with their partners.<sup>vi</sup>

**Care-giving for those with HIV/AIDS falls to women and girls, creating a cycle of vulnerability.**<sup>vii</sup> Many female caregivers have little extra time to earn money, produce food, attend school and support their families. Consequently, these women and girls, along with their families, are more likely to be malnourished, in poor health and impoverished – all factors that further increase susceptibility to HIV infection.

While **maternal mortality** is decreasing in most of the world, it is **increasing in regions with high burdens of HIV/AIDS.**

**HIV/AIDS is a leading cause of death among pregnant women and mothers.** Women of reproductive age are the most at-risk for HIV infection, and many HIV-positive women in developing countries learn that they are infected with the virus only after they are pregnant. Pregnancy exacerbates the symptoms and effects of HIV. New HIV prevention tools designed specifically for women would support the fight against maternal and child mortality.

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## New Female-Initiated HIV Prevention Options are Urgently Needed

**Current prevention strategies are not enough to stop the spread of HIV among women.** Many women are unable to negotiate with their partners to use condoms or remain faithful. Abstinence is not a practical option for women who are married, want to have children or are at risk of violence.

**Microbicides and MPTs are being developed to address women's sexual and reproductive health needs.** Two microbicides are now being studied in late-stage clinical trials: a vaginal gel used around the time of sex that contains the ARV tenofovir and IPM's monthly vaginal ring designed to slowly release the ARV dapivirine to protect against HIV. Products called multipurpose prevention technologies (MPTs) that combine an ARV with a contraceptive are also being developed to prevent both HIV and pregnancy, the two leading causes of death among women of reproductive age. Among the MPTs in development are IPM's 60-day ring designed to release dapivirine along with the contraceptive hormone levonorgestrel.

**Microbicides would complement existing HIV prevention methods.** Microbicides and MPTs would be a vital part of a comprehensive HIV prevention strategy, alongside behavior change, abstinence, male and female condoms and male circumcision — as well as other approaches being developed, including oral or injectable ARV-based products (known as pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP) and HIV vaccines.

**Give women and girls the power to protect themselves from HIV. We are already facing a recession of care. We cannot allow HIV to contribute further to this burden.**

Michel Sidibé  
Executive Director, UNAIDS

**Meeting the promise of microbicides requires continued support.** Between 2011 and 2012, global investment in microbicide research and development grew by US\$59 million to a total of US\$245 million.<sup>viii</sup> This momentum is critical to meeting the urgency of the epidemic. Safe and effective microbicides would empower women to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and could help alter the course of the epidemic.

<sup>i</sup> UNAIDS, "2013 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic," 2013

<sup>ii</sup> UNAIDS, "Sub-Saharan Africa – AIDS epidemic facts and figures," 2012

<sup>iii</sup> UNAIDS, "Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic 2013: Epidemiology slides," 2013

<sup>iv</sup> A Cross-Sectional and Prospective, Observational, Cohort Study to Estimate HIV Incidence among Sexually Active Adult Females; [www.IPMglobal.org](http://www.IPMglobal.org)

<sup>v</sup> UNAIDS, "Fact sheet: Adolescents, young people and HIV," 2012

<sup>vi</sup> UNAIDS/WHO, "Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic," November 2010

<sup>vii</sup> "Women hold up half the sky – and half the burden of the HIV epidemic". Heidari et al. *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, 2013

<sup>viii</sup> HIV Vaccines and Microbicides Resource Tracking Working Group, "Microbicides," 2013