

Acceptability of gel and condom use and of STI partner notification among couples preparing for a microbicide development programme effectiveness trial

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Author: A.S. Ssali, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda
Co-author(s): J.O mr Ouma J, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda
W.N ms Nalukenge, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda
R.L mr Lubega, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda
M.K ms Kasse, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda
S.W mr Wandiembe, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda
S.M dr McCormack, MRC Clinical Trials Unit, London, United Kingdom
H.G dr Grosskurth, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda
A.K dr Kamali, Medical Research Council/UVRI, Kampala, Uganda

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Objectives

To evaluate the potential willingness of women and their regular male partners of using gel as well as condoms and to notify their partners of intercurrent STI, during a microbicide trial.

Methods

Between August 2003 and September 2004, 85 women from HIV discordant and 38 from concordant negative couple relationships were systematically recruited to a microbicide trial feasibility study, following a serological survey in 5 rural communities, enrolled at government health units and followed every 3-months for one year. At each visit couples were interviewed independently on sexual behaviour and gel acceptability. Ten single sex focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were conducted to assess attitudes and issues surrounding participation in the study.

STIs were treated and VCT and condom use strongly recommended and provided by research team.

Results

At enrolment, only 12% of couples reported consistent condom use. After 12 months this had increased to 33%. 67% of 186 (79 men, 107 female) at 12 months reported sharing HIV test results with partners. 33 (33%) of women at baseline and 5 (5%) at 12 months had STI symptoms and were given treatment for partner. However, during FGDs, men and women independently reported difficulties in communicating positive HIV test results and other STIs to their partners. Women feared being asked the source of STIs, and both men and women feared marital breakdown. Majority of men and women reported that gel use was acceptable and easy to discuss with partners provided it has no side effects.

Conclusion

There is a high level of willingness to use gel, but only a third of couples use condoms consistently. There are fears among both men and women associated with partner notification about STIs and HIV infection. These are important findings for the design of future microbicide effectiveness trials in this population.