

HEALTH

CONDOM SENSE

The use of condoms may be on the rise, but are they being used effectively?

By John Ferri
Staff Writer

As people's awareness of sexually transmitted diseases grow, and the reality of the threat of AIDS to all races and sexual orientations is accepted, information about the role of condoms in protection from STDs has become more accessible, but even informed individuals do not always use condoms correctly or consistently, health care professionals have said.

"People are getting the information, but they're not using it," said Kathy Gavin, a former Planned Parenthood clinician who is currently running the Sexual Health Clinic for Whitman County Public Health.

Gavin, who worked at Planned Parenthood for six years, said that "People may be using condoms, but they're not using them consistently, and that's not going to work."

After abstinence, use of a condom is the most effective prevention of STDs, said Mick Moser, a health educator at WSU Health and Wellness services.

"Condoms are not 100 percent effective," she stressed. "If used improperly, condoms are not effective for the prevention of pregnancy or STDs."

According to the March 1989 issue of Consumer Reports, a properly used intact condom can be close to 100 percent effective.

A number of laboratory experiments have tested whether various sexually transmitted germs — some less than one-fifth the size of a sperm cell — can get through latex condoms, the report stated. Such experiments have confirmed that intact latex condoms will not let the smallest microbe through.

This evidence, the article states, compelled the Food and Drug Administration in 1987 to let condom manufacturers list diseases that properly used condoms can help prevent: syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, genital herpes, and AIDS.

Pamphlets on condom use and safe sex are available at WSU Health and Wellness Services, Moser said.

She also said that there are coin operated condom

The large jump in condom sales, he said, coincided with the public's initial awareness of the threat of AIDS.

The 1989 Consumer Reports' article stated however, that condom sales had risen over 60 percent in the past two-and-a-half years. The report attributed this rise in condom sales to the fact that groups of people — especially women and gay men — who had not previously made up a large percentage of the condom market, are now buying and using them.

Women today account for 40 to 50 percent of condom purchases, the report states. That figure is up from 10 percent a few years ago, according to the report.

"We thought women were going to become a larger part of our market than they eventually did," Klein said.

Women make up only about 20 percent of the market for Trojans, he said, and although they had marketed a Trojan For Women, which was advertised specifically in women's magazines, it "didn't pan out, so we are aiming our advertising and marketing at new products."

"A fair amount of young people are using condoms, and a lot know they should be," said Don Falk, president of Schmid Laboratories Inc., which manufactures Ram-

breakage problem, because friction, and therefore wear, on the condom is lessened.

Condoms which are marketed as sensitive or thin are not necessarily weaker than condoms of normal thickness. Sheik Super Thin condoms, Falk said, are 35 percent thinner, but just as strong as a normal condom.

"The formulation and processing of latex are to the point where we (manufacturers) can maintain the strength, but with more sensitivity," he said.

The same technology allows condom makers to create "extra strong" condoms that are "slightly thicker, but significantly stronger," Falk said.

Lambskin condoms, made from lamb cecum (part of the animal's large intestine), are marketed as being the most sensitive of all, and as having better or more realistic heat transfer than latex models. These natural condoms, however, because of their possible porosity, are not recommended for prevention of STDs, including AIDS, according to pharmacists and health care professionals.

"We cater to some married couples who prefer the lambskin condoms," said Stan Bye, manager of Family Center Pharmacy at Dissmore's in Pullman.

Condoms labeled as being spermicidally lubricated almost all contain the spermicide nonoxynol 9, the active ingredient in most over-the-counter spermicides. The nonoxynol 9 in condoms is integrated into a lubricant base, Falk said.

Nonoxynol 9 kills sperm cells through a detergent action that attacks the cell membrane. It also kills various organisms that cause sexually transmitted disease, including AIDS, according to Consumer Reports.

The amount of nonoxynol 9 in condoms, the report said, is no substitute for a vaginal spermicide, which may be applied in greater quantity.

Nonoxynol 9 may be found in spermicides in concentrations from 1 to 12 percent. In condoms, the range of concentration of nonoxynol 9 in the lubricant base is 5 to 6.6 percent.

There are many more variations in condom style, including colored and ribbed condoms, but those factors do not have as much to do with protection as they do with personal preference.

A spermicidally lubricated condom with a receptacle tip, used in conjunction with a vaginal spermicide is the best protection against STDs, except for abstinence from sex or sexual contact, health care professionals agree.

According to sales figures of some of the major U.S. condom manufacturers though, that is not a guideline being heeded by some consumers.

Lifestyles' Ultra Sensitive is "by far" the number one seller in that line of condoms, said Marie Kraemer, prod-



ses, Sheik, Excita and Fourex condoms.

"But younger people have this feeling that the people they are (having sex) with are nice and good, and a feeling of invincibility about themselves," he said.

Gavin cites other reasons for people, even those who know they should be, not using condoms.

The fact that people more often have multiple partners within a given time frame may mean that the comfort level of talking about birth control with a new partner may be lower, she said.

"The feeling among a lot of young people," she said, "is that if they (either partner) talk about birth control before having intercourse they are not a good person, because they planned having sex."

"It's archaic thinking, but it's still there."

"Alcohol is also a factor. They might have the condom and the information about using it, but then they have three or four beers and the condom never gets used."

Even with knowledge about the importance of using condoms, condom users are still left with the decision of which condom to choose.

With the overwhelming number of choices in brand and style at any given pharmacy or supermarket display, it is important to make an informed choice.

The challenge for manufacturers "is to make the package label clearer and more descriptive," Falk said.

But descriptions like the one on the package of Lifestyles' Ultra Sensitive condoms, which claim that the product is "Almost like using nothing at all," do not really say a whole lot about its effectiveness.

Brand name is also important to consumers, Falk said. People are looking for "a company they can trust."

A typical pharmacy or supermarket display may have between five to seven brands of condoms to choose from. Each of those brands may offer six or more styles.

One way to narrow down the choices — personal preference aside — is to realize what the different condom options actually mean.

Condoms with a receptacle or reservoir tip, for example, may have less of a breakage problem.

Those that are lubricated may also have less of a

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machines on campus in some residence halls, in Holland Library restrooms, in CUB restrooms and at student health.

Mark Klein, vice president of New York based Carter-Wallace Inc., which manufactures the Trojan line of condoms, said that condom sales had risen 44 percent since 1986, but "the market has leveled off since then."

uct manager for the line manufactured by Ansell Inc.

That style of condom alone accounts for 45 percent of sales, she said. Vibra ribbed and spermicidally lubricated condoms make up 20 and 12 percent of Lifestyles sales respectively.

However, the Trojan-Enz, a receptacle tip, spermicidally lubricated model, is the top selling Trojan product at