

Yes, a female condom

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Sometime during the next six months, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration will consider approving the FC2, a second-generation female condom. That appears likely, since an FDA advisory panel unanimously recommended the product in a Dec. 11 vote.

The female condom allows women to take the lead in protecting themselves from HIV infection. In short - they don't have to rely on their male partner to take the responsibility. This has the potential to be a lifesaver.

A 2005 study by Dr. David Holtgrave found that distributing 16.6 million female condoms in South Africa could prevent 10,000 HIV infections. Holtgrave, chairman of the Department of Health, Behavior and Society at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, found that female condoms also would save up to \$35.7 million in health care costs in South Africa.

The FC2 could save lives here, too - especially in the African-American community. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2005 HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, "The rate of AIDS diagnoses for black women was nearly 23 times the rate for white women." High-risk sexual contact was responsible for 74 percent of those infections.

Despite those terrifying numbers, many women are reluctant to push their partners to wear condoms, for fear of driving them away. Wider availability and affordability of the FC2 could allow women to protect

themselves without having to negotiate with their partners. Like a traditional male condom, it would protect men and women from HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The FC2 would be roughly 30 percent cheaper than its first generation predecessor, which sells for \$1.15 to \$2.75 in the U.S. and about 80 cents in other parts of the world. But that might still be a barrier, because male condoms are significantly less expensive. According to a 2007 report by the United Nations Population Fund, the female condom "has not yet achieved its full potential due to inadequate promotional activities, insufficient supply and comparatively higher cost than male condoms."

International aid agencies pay about 3 cents each for male condoms. So it's no surprise that in 2007 donors provided 3.1 billion male condoms around the world but only 16.5 million female condoms.

But as with all products, female condoms should see a rise in demand as the price drops. So the FC2 will be a benefit to public health here and abroad.

It can save lives.

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