

User Perspectives on Vaginal Microbicide Gels for Prevention of Pregnancy and HIV

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Background

Research on user perspectives of vaginal microbicides has taken place largely within the context of clinical trials in the African countries where need is likely to be greatest. Trials generally require women to be using effective contraceptive methods, and do not assess interest in a method for dual prevention of HIV and pregnancy. However, the microbicide trial environment is an appropriate setting in which to learn about views and assumptions about multipurpose prevention. This paper presents data on the perspectives of clinical trial participants and their partners, as well as the community stakeholders (including health professionals) who will likely advise on use of future multiple prevention products.

Methods

HPTN035a was conducted as ancillary to the HPTN035 trial of two candidate microbicide gels, BufferGel® and Pro 2000/5. HPTN035a was conducted at the clinical trial sites in Harare, Zimbabwe, and Lilongwe, Malawi using qualitative research methods to collect data from women participating in the trial, their male partners community stakeholders and health professionals. All participants were asked about their interest in a multipurpose microbicide gel. However, this question was more thoroughly probed in interviews with health professionals and community stakeholders than interviewees with trial participants and their partners, in order to minimize the possibility that additional questioning could introduce confusion and misperceptions among trial participants.

Study Population

| | n=212 | Malawi | Zimbabwe |
|--|-------|--------|----------|
| Health professionals persons at all levels within formal (public, private and research) and informal health care delivery | | 20 | 17 |
| Community Stakeholders members of community advisory boards, and leaders from NGOs, churches, schools, and other local organizations | | 16 | 18 |
| Female Clinical Trial Participants | 43 | | 37 |
| Male Partners of Clinical Trial Participants | | 30 | 21 |



Findings

In favor of a vaginal product that prevents HIV and pregnancy: Health professionals & community stakeholders 97%, Female trial participants 74%, Male partners 49%

| Key Factors that Would Lead to Support for a Multipurpose Method | Illustrative Quotes |
|--|---|
| <p>Potential change/reduction in drug load</p> <p>Alternatives are needed for current contraceptive methods</p> <p>Currently available contraceptive methods have contraindications and side effects that make them difficult for some women to use, and participants were interested in having other options.</p> <p>Furthermore, health professionals <u>assumed</u> that a contraceptive microbicide would reduce the overall drug load in a woman's body.</p> <p>Many women do not like currently available methods and/or experience side effects with these and should not take them.</p> | <p><i>A lot of women at the moment are getting a lot of family planning drugs. Some of them are sick, some of them have got hypertension, some of them have got cardiac problems. So at times we need to reduce that drug load. If they get a method that is going to prevent pregnancy and at the same time prevent them from acquiring HIV, and they are only going to get one drug for that, I think it's best for the health of the woman (Zimbabwe Health Professional)</i></p> <p><i>It is just simple to insert a gel and it doesn't go into the system. It's something topical not something taken into the blood system (Zimbabwe Health Professional)</i></p> <p><i>...if they prevent both, I think that will be better... For women to say they are preventing HIV with gel and they are also taking pills to prevent pregnancy that will be too much on one person (Zimbabwe male partner)</i></p> <p><i>So if the microbicide could prevent pregnancy as well it would be a welcome idea to those who do not like the available family planning methods. (Malawi Community Stakeholder)</i></p> |
| <p>Easier adherence</p> <p>Using one product instead of two should lead to better adherence.</p> | <p><i>I think they should apply to both because instead of a woman to have so many things, that she requires a Depo and the gel, and the man a condom. All that is too much, if there could be one thing that would cater for both the disease and the pregnancy at the same time, like what is there on a condom, if it could just be as simple as this gel (Zimbabwe male partner)</i></p> <p><i>It would be very good if protection from HIV and pregnancy could be one thing (Malawi female trial participant)</i></p> |
| <p>Single-purpose HIV-prevention method may be less attractive</p> <p>Participants expressed possible negative implications for a microbicide that only prevents HIV infection.</p> | <p><i>...condoms, if they are used consistently, protect them from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections including HIV, which is a good thing because you don't need to use two different products for you to get two results. ...Maybe they will not like [microbicides] because it is only doing one thing. That is, protecting them against HIV/AIDS, instead of it being dual in nature that is protecting them from HIV/AIDS as well as protecting them from pregnancy. (Malawi Health Professional)</i></p> |
| <p>Contraceptives could be a "cover up" for HIV prevention.</p> <p>Many people find it easier to talk about the need for contraceptives than HIV prevention. Contraceptive use could be the stated reason for using microbicides, with the disease preventive aspect being an unspoken benefit.</p> | <p><i>Because you can tell the husband that 'Didn't we agree that we don't want a baby at the moment? It's family planning.' But you know that you are protecting yourself from HIV. (Zimbabwe Community Stakeholder)</i></p> <p><i>If used as a family planning method, it would also help. Especially in communities where people ...cannot use the condom because of traditional reasons. Like, if you use a condom you are labelled promiscuous. (Zimbabwe Community Stakeholder)</i></p> |
| <p>Discreet/secret use strategies already known for contraceptives</p> <p>Historically, many women have not disclosed information about contraceptive use to their partner. For some women, having the option to protect themselves from pregnancy and HIV prevention without engaging their partners may increase acceptability and adherence. However, this potential may hinder male acceptability.</p> | <p><i>Because in family planning, they never told their husbands. Ninety percent, they just take [the contraceptive]. (Zimbabwe Community Stakeholder)</i></p> <p><i>Yes, they will use the gel without telling their partners. You know, even with family planning there are some women who are using the methods without telling their partners. (Malawi Community Stakeholder)</i></p> |
| <p>Users may assume multipurpose prevention</p> <p>Users may assume a contraceptive effect, regardless of what they are told. Since the association between sex and its possible consequences is strong (e.g., pregnancy, STIs, HIV infection), it could logically follow that a prevention product used in the vagina would prevent these consequences.</p> | <p><i>You know they might take it for granted that it also prevents [pregnancy]. ... they will use it thinking it will prevent the pregnancy as well. (Zimbabwe Health Professional)</i></p> <p><i>When having sex, there are usually two outcomes, becoming pregnant or getting infected. So it good that the gel protects one from both. (Malawi male partner)</i></p> <p><i>I think they should prevent both because if they prevent the disease it means maybe they prevent the sperms from getting to me so I cannot be pregnant. (Zimbabwe female trial participant)</i></p> |



Conclusions

All participants agreed that the views of health professionals and community stakeholders will be important for introduction of a vaginal microbicide (*data not presented here*). Health professionals and community stakeholders were strongly in favor of a multipurpose method for prevention of HIV and pregnancy (97%). Female trial participants were generally favorable (74%), and men were less favorable (49%). Health professionals and community stakeholders expressed a number of factors that might motivate interest in a multipurpose product, and these should be carefully considered in future microbicide research.

- Clarity is needed on the "total drug load" of a multipurpose method, and expected side effects and contraindications.
- People may assume a contraceptive effect of vaginal microbicides regardless of what they are told.
- People want a choice of method with and without contraception.
- Strategies for discreetly or covertly using a multipurpose HIV prevention contraceptive may be similar to those used for contraceptives.
- Use of a microbicide for contraceptive purposes may serve as a "cover" for HIV prevention.
- Convenience of a single method for multiple purposes is appealing

As with contraceptives, careful management of male partner support and considerations of the decisions to disclose use will be important for this type of multipurpose prevention technology. Health professional and community stakeholders may be inclined to encourage use, and are an important resource for successful product introduction.

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