

## INTERNAL CONDOMS: A TOOL FOR SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

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### What are internal condoms?

- Internal condoms, previously called female condoms, are currently the only non-hormonal prevention method designed for women to initiate that provides effective protection against unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV transmission.<sup>1</sup>
- Internal condoms are an important method of protection for people of all genders and sexual orientations who engage in receptive vaginal or anal sex because internal condoms give them more agency, or ability to make their own free choices, over their sexual health.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2018, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reclassified internal condoms from a Class III to Class II device, which makes it easier to manufacture and access. It was also renamed “single-use internal condom” from “single-use female condom” to provide a more gender-inclusive description of who can use internal condoms. With this change, internal condoms have now been approved by the FDA for both vaginal and anal sex.<sup>3</sup>
- There are several types of internal condoms currently available, such as the FC2. The FC2 is made of nitrile (a synthetic latex) and held in place by a plastic ring. The FC2 has been distributed in 144 countries since its introduction in 2007 and is currently the only internal condom approved by the FDA.<sup>4</sup>
- Internal condoms are made of nitrile rather than latex, which makes them less likely to break than external condoms (or male condoms).<sup>5</sup>

### Internal condoms are an important tool to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights

- Internal condoms are just as effective as external condoms at preventing unintended pregnancy, STIs, and HIV.<sup>6</sup>
- Studies show that women who are instructed on the proper use of internal condoms and have access to this prevention option alongside external condoms increasingly accept and use internal condoms compared with women who do not receive instruction.<sup>7,8</sup>
- As a non-hormonal form of contraception, internal condoms are an option for women who prefer not to use or have had problems using hormonal contraception.<sup>9</sup>
- Widespread access to internal condoms shows an increase in protected sex acts and may be a cost-effective way to prevent HIV and AIDS.<sup>10</sup>
- Women and girls are biologically more susceptible to HIV and other STIs because more of the skin on the vulva and vagina is exposed, resulting in a greater chance of infection during penetrative sex.<sup>11</sup> As a result, women and girls who are receptive partners in penetrative sex have a greater need for effective prevention of HIV and other STIs.<sup>12</sup>

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- The outer ring of internal condoms covers a greater surface area on the entrance to the vagina, which may provide increased protection against herpes, HPV, and other STIs transmitted through skin-to-skin contact.<sup>13</sup>
- Internal condoms can also be a useful tool for anal intercourse, but limited research exists on the efficacy of internal condoms in anal sex.<sup>14, 15</sup>

### Internal condoms are widely accepted and provide many benefits, such as increased sexual agency and increased pleasure

- Studies show positive responses to internal condoms from women and men of various ages, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and geographic location.<sup>16,17</sup>
- Internal condoms have shown increased pleasure for both male and female sexual partners compared with external condoms.<sup>18,19</sup>
- Internal condoms are an effective intervention for key populations with specific sexual and reproductive health and rights needs, such as female sex workers. Sex workers report that using internal condoms gives them an effective contraception option when they are not in a position to negotiate external condom use.<sup>20</sup>
- Internal condoms can be inserted up to eight hours before sex. As a result, it can be a useful form of protection for women at risk of experiencing interpersonal violence.<sup>21</sup>
- Internal condoms may not be an effective solution if a person is not anticipating having sex because it may not be possible to find private spaces to insert internal condoms immediately before sex.<sup>22</sup>
- Internal condoms increase the amount of reproductive control women have in their sexual relationships, resulting in reports of less stress during sex.<sup>23</sup>
- Internal condoms can contribute to increased communication around safer sex to counter gender norms around sex in various partnerships, such as sex workers and clients, married or long term partners, and HIV-discordant couples (when one partner is living with HIV and the other partner is not).<sup>24,25</sup>

### Structural barriers to increased uptake of internal condoms

- The United Nations Commission on Life-Saving Commodities for Women and Children lists internal condoms as under-used but highly effective to improve reproductive health outcomes and save women's lives.<sup>26</sup>
- Internal condoms are more expensive than external condoms, which creates a barrier in promoting uptake.<sup>27</sup>

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- Many women report difficulty accessing internal condoms because of their limited availability.<sup>28,29,30</sup>
- Studies show that women think internal condoms are cumbersome and difficult to insert. Therefore, information and education on proper use is needed.<sup>31,32,33</sup>

### The way forward

- In 2014, internal condoms represented only 0.9 percent of the total condoms distributed by donor countries.<sup>34</sup>
- It is essential to increase the demand for internal condoms through evidence-based interventions to counter common barriers to their use. Making internal condoms more widely available and increasing women's contraceptive and prevention options can increase their use and acceptability.<sup>35</sup>
- While global HIV programs, such as PEPFAR and The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, include internal condoms in their programming, comprehensive internal condom promotion should be emphasized in a wider range of public health programming beyond HIV prevention services.<sup>36</sup>
- The updated guidelines from the FDA on internal condoms explicitly approve the use of internal condoms for anal sex.<sup>37</sup> In light of this change, it is important to expand research and programming to include this guidance.<sup>38</sup>

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### Endnotes

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