

An effective weapon against Aids

By GATONYE GATHURA

For complete protection against sexual transmission of HIV/Aids, you either practise total abstinence from sex or have relations with a mutually faithful unaffected partner only.

However, abstinence and lifelong fidelity to one uninfected partner are not the experience of millions.

This is the reality. Despite national efforts to contain the spread of HIV, there is little to prove that Kenyans have changed their sexual behaviour.

There is full consensus that the

level of Aids awareness is quite high so now is the time to convert awareness into action.

Public health measures to slow the spread of the disease must include the promotion of effective protection and education in its proper use.

One organisation that has done a lot to translate the existing awareness into action is Population Services International (PSI).

PSI is an international non-profit organisation which provides low-cost health and family planning products to the low income groups in developing countries.

PSI are the distributors of TRUST Condoms. The organisation uses commercial marketing techniques and resources of the local private sector such as distributors, retailers and advertising agencies.

Their products however are sold at reduced prices thus making them affordable to low income groups.

They are sold rather than given away to ensure that recipients truly want them and will use them.

These subsidies and other programme costs are underwritten by contracts or grants from gov-

ernments, international agencies and foundations. Project revenues are reinvested in programme activities.

The organisation distributes latex condoms and not natural membrane (skin) condoms which do not offer the same level of protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV as latex condoms.

PSI has collaborated in international research which indicates that latex condoms are highly effective in reducing the risk of sexual transmission of HIV which causes Aids.

Despite evidence that condoms reduce the risk of Aids, it does not eliminate all the risk. Condoms have been likened to a fire alarm which does not eliminate the risk but sounds the warning bell and thus helps reduce the damage.

The failure of the condom to provide 100 per cent protection against Aids and other STDs has given rise to a degree of uncertainty in the general public about their effectiveness.

This concern has been exploited by critics opposed to condom promotion and to increasing access to condoms for people at risk of contracting HIV and other STDs.

Ms Mukami Mugo, the sales manager with PSI, says that they are aware that condoms are not perfect. However, their impact in preventing the transmission of STDs and thus limiting their spread is documented and is both measurable and dramatic.

Asking whether condoms offer absolute protection is the wrong question from a public health perspective but rather the right question is: How can condoms be most effectively used to prevent the spread of the disease?

To insist that they must offer absolute protection "is to hold condoms to standards not required of any other public health prevention strategy, while deaths from Aids continue to mount," she said.

Two issues generally surface in the debate over the advocacy of condom in the prevention of HIV infection.

One concerns the concepts of efficacy and effectiveness, the other the fear that making condoms available will encourage early sexual activity among the young generation and extra marital sex among adults.

According to PSI Nairobi office, the effectiveness of consistent condom users has been studied and documented.

"In three such studies, consistent condom use provided 70 per cent to 100 per cent in reduction in the risk of transmitting HIV infection," the study said.

These studies have involved couples in which one partner has HIV infection.

One of these studies makes the distinction between benefits of consistent and inconsistent condom use.

In that study, 563 couples from nine different countries were evaluated.

Overall, 12 per cent of the male partners and 20 per cent of the female partners of HIV-infected persons were infected.

However, among the 24 couples who consistently used condoms, none of their partners became infected. By contrast, among the 44 couples who reported inconsistent use of condoms, six female partners were infected.

For condoms to provide a high degree of protection against HIV infection, they must be used consistently and correctly; inconsistent condom use provides an unacceptable low rate of protection.

Citing a study reported in the authoritative American Journal of Public Health, PSI holds that it is important to encourage young people to postpone sexual activity.

"We must exercise leadership and strive for a climate supportive of young people and help to create a health oriented social norm for adolescents and teenagers' sexuality," said PSI.

While PSI enthusiastically delivers a *Do not do it* message, it persuasively encourages those who are involved in risky sexual activities to reduce the attendant dangers through correct and consistent condom use.

"Our message is, when used correctly and consistently, condoms are highly effective, when used otherwise they are not," says PSI.

The quality of condoms can be affected in several stages which include:

• **Manufacturing:** Since condoms are today produced in large quantities, more tight quality control procedures are observed.

Each Trust condom is electronically tested. This means during manufacture, the condom is dipped in a solution which reacts to an electric current on the inside of the condom, this is to test for a pinhole.

• **Storage:** Condoms are perishable and unless they are properly stored, their quality will be compromised.

Condoms should be stored away from heat, humidity, direct sunlight, ultraviolet light, insects, rodents, oil and oil products.

• **Usage:** For proper protection, the condom must be used correctly. A user should check for the expiry date, discoloration, dryness, brittleness before use.

During use, one should apply the right lubricant (water-based only) and ensure no air is trapped in the tip.

• **Pores:** The most sensitive issue on condoms is that they have pores that let the virus through.

The Aids virus is very small: about 0.1 microns in diameter (the diameter of the head of a human sperm is about 3 microns).

Given the size of HIV virus, people have questioned whether good quality condoms might prevent the passage of sperm but still allow HIV leakage through naturally occurring pores in latex.

Two studies have been carried out in which condoms have been examined microscopically for evidence of porosity. One study by the US National Institute of Health found no condom pores at x2000 magnification.

A second study, by Consumers Union, used a scanning electron microscope at x30,000 power, a magnification at which HIV size particles can be observed.

This study reported a somewhat bumpy condom surface, but no pores, even when condoms were stretched.

One of the major complaints by people who have tried using condoms is breakage.

Breakage of condoms is determined by the quality. If a condom is not properly used, been exposed to heat and humidity, it is likely to break.

Reports of condom breakage and slippage must not be confused with condom failure rates, a term used for condom failure resulting in pregnancy or disease transmission.

Condom failure can be caused by a number of factors, including not failure to use it with every new act.

An undetermined proportion of reported breakage and slippage is attributable to condom misuse.

Misuse includes the application of oil-based lubricants (for example petroleum jelly, shortening, mineral oil, massage oils, body lotions, or cooking oils), which can severely damage condoms within brief periods.

Other examples of condom misuse include damage from finger nails or other sharp objects, inadequate space in the condom tip, air trapped in the tip, unrolling the condom before donning, inadequate unrolling or lubrication, poor withdrawal technique, improper storage and condom re-use.

PSI uses creative means to motivate behavioral change and to educate and increase product awareness.

These creative campaigns employ radio, folk, theatre, popular songs, TV spots and even dress fabric printed with Aids prevention messages.

The organisation has its headquarters in Washington D.C. while the Nairobi office is in Westlands.

"With TRUST you have double protection."



The surest way to AVOID AIDS is by either abstaining from sex altogether or by being faithfully to a single uninfected partner.

But not everyone will follow these disciplines.

The only other effective protection is by using a high quality latex rubber condom properly each and every time you have sex.

Other methods may prevent unwanted pregnancies, but condoms will prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS as well as unwanted pregnancies.

But which one should you use?

You can trust TRUST to be your reliable bodyguard.

TRUST condoms are:

- Made of high quality latex
- Electronically tested for reliability and safety
- Well lubricated
- Manufactured to international quality standards

Each pack contains easy-to-follow user information

They are available in a duka near you at the low price of Shs. 10 for 3.

TRUST IS A PRODUCT OF PSI, A NON-PROFIT SOCIAL MARKETING ORGANISATION

THE CONDOMS FOR MAXIMUM PROTECTION

