

# Women's Health

## Spermicides

### What are they?

Spermicides are a chemical method of contraception. They can be used alone, or with a barrier contraceptive such as a diaphragm, cervical cap or condom.

### How do they work?

When spermicide comes in contact with sperm, it kills the sperm before they can enter the uterus and migrate to the fallopian tubes to fertilize the egg. Spermicides also kill some germs, such as gonorrhea.

### Are there different kinds of spermicides?

The most well known chemical spermicide is nonoxynol-9. Octoxynol is another. Spermicides come in various forms including jellies, creams, foams, suppositories, tablets and soluble films. Foams come in aerosol containers with an applicator to insert the product into the vagina. Films are paper-thin 2"x2" sheets made of a water -soluble substance. The sheets are folded and inserted into the vagina.

### How effective are spermicides?

How well spermicides prevent pregnancy is highly variable depending on whether they are used correctly and consistently. Their effectiveness also depends upon whether they are used in addition to another barrier method, such as the diaphragm, cervical cap, or condom. If used perfectly, the failure rate may be as low as 3%. However in typical uses, the failure rate can be as high as 36%!

### Are there side effects?

Spermicides can cause rash, irritation, or a burning sensation in either partner. Whether they decrease a woman's risk of becoming infected with HIV is unclear.

### Where can I get them?

You can buy spermicides in pharmacies, supermarkets, and many convenience stores without a prescription.

### Tips for using spermicides

- Make sure you have a supply of spermicide on hand. The most common mistake is failure to use spermicide.
- When using film, make sure your hands are completely dry. Otherwise, the film has a tendency to stick to your fingers.
- When using suppositories, make sure to push the suppository high up into the vagina.
- When using foams, creams, or jellies with an applicator, insert the applicator high up into the vagina before pushing the plunger of the applicator.

### Advantages and disadvantages of spermicides

#### Advantages

- Available without a prescription in pharmacies, supermarkets, and convenience stores.
- Relatively inexpensive
- Easy to use, convenient
- Can be used without the man's cooperation
- Can be used as a lubricant
- May help prevent some sexually transmitted diseases (gonorrhea, chlamydia)

#### Disadvantages

- Irritation possible in either men or women
- May not protect against HIV transmission
- High failure rate
- Need to use with each act of intercourse
- May seem messy

#### **Points to remember**

- Be sure to read the instructions carefully. Each method has different directions for insertion. For example, spermicidal films and suppositories must be inserted about 15 minutes before actual intercourse to allow adequate time for them to dissolve.
- Use spermicide every time you have intercourse.
- Insert the spermicide deep in the vagina and before your partner's penis penetrates your vagina
- Reapply spermicide for each additional episode of intercourse.
- Do not douche after intercourse.
- Keep spermicides in a convenient location. Store in a cool, dry place.
- Wash the spermicide applicator after each use with soap and warm water.