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## Microbicide advocates stress options



Researchers hope microbicides are the next step in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

**By Amy Wooten**  
*Staff writer*

With over 33 million people living with HIV/AIDS globally, advocates stress that more prevention options are needed, and a product currently in development—microbicides—could potentially save millions of people.

Microbicides have for years tried to prevent other STDs, and a different, safe and effective new method of HIV transmission, and some even used in the vagina are biologically very different to be developed.

The rectum is what AIDS For Rectal Microbicides Advocates (AFC) calls the "perfect storm" for HIV infection. Although women will be conducting safety trials to determine if the rectal microbicides, men and women will ideally utilize them.

According to AFC policy manager Terlikowski, Chicago has been a hub for microbicide activism.

"This is the city where microbicide research has taken place for the last 10 years," Terlikowski said.

That is why advocates are excited to see a clinical trial of a vaginal microbicide gel will take place in Chicago, as we aid that the trial would most likely be launched this summer and additional research and development is on the rise.

"There has been a groundswell of public and private investments," according to Terlikowski.

Between fiscal year 1999 and 2008, U.S. funding for such research and development has increased nearly 20-fold.

The Obama White House is also included it in the White House Microbicide Development Act introduced by Sen. Barack Obama.

Pickett said the support from the top leaves advocates feeling very optimistic.

"We don't have to deny behavior and pretend gay people don't exist" to get government permission to quietly conduct rectal microbicide research for fear of getting their funding pulled.

This increased attention has allowed scientists to make headway. New research suggests Pickett said the initial study's results, while not statistically significant, still "offer the first glimpse of what is now taking place.

While interest and support of vaginal microbicides has increased over the years, support for rectal microbicides in the gay community—is not as strong.

According to Pickett, the rectal microbicide field is "significantly behind" for various reasons. Data on sexual behavior, even today, is spotty. Also, and attached to it and homophobia.

"This is typical of anything that has to do with anal sex or gay men," Pickett said. "We need to focus on saving lives."

Regardless, headway has been made. UCLA recently conducted the world's first rectal microbicide safety trial, and several more Phase 1 safety trials are already planned or underway. Safety trials of vaginal microbicides used rectally have taken place, as well.

International Rectal Microbicides Advocates, an organization created in 2005 by a handful of individuals that now boasts nearly 900 members, calls for rectal microbicide funding to increase five-fold by 2010, from \$7 million in U.S. funding per year to \$35 million. A large bulk of current rectal microbicide

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funding comes from the NIH, which accounts for over half of federal microbicide (rectal ar

Advocates emphasize that gay men aren't the only ones having anal sex. Between 10-35 practice anal sex. Studies also show that more straight women than gay men in the U.S. | largely practiced unprotected.

l up to 40 percent of men in the U.S. d that heterosexual anal sex is

According to IRMA, even a 60 percent effective microbicide used by 20 percent of sexuall million HIV infections over the course of three years.

-income countries could prevent 2.5

Advocates additionally point out that condom use will not disappear with the eventual ava condom use, which is believed to be 98 percent effective. Advocates say microbicides will, rather, become a part of a comprehensive prevention strategy.

at they will continue to stress

"They won't replace condoms," Terlikowski said. "Condoms still serve as the gold standard."

Microbicides additionally can be useful for those who don't use condoms at all. Vaginal microbicides are particularly important for women who can't negotiate condom use in a relationship for fear of physical abuse, which is often the case in poorer countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, where 60 percent of those with HIV are women, less than 7 percent of women reported using a condom the last time they had sex with their primary partner. A vaginal gel, however, can be applied secretly.

There are also no options for those who simply don't want to use condoms. And although many gay men have lessened their risk over the years by methods like serosorting, microbicides could further reduce their risk. While some believe that advocating alternatives to the condom equates advocating unprotected sex, microbicide advocates like Pickett quip that something is far better than nothing.

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