

69: Relationships and male influence on young women's use of a microbicide-proxy

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Abstract:

Purpose: Vaginal microbicides are proposed as woman-controlled, potentially surreptitious methods of STD prevention. However, little is known about how such products are used in the context of romantic and sexual relationships of adolescent and young adult women.

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Article:

Purpose

Vaginal microbicides are proposed as woman-controlled, potentially surreptitious methods of STD prevention. However, little is known about how such products are used in the context of romantic and sexual relationships of adolescent and young adult women.

Methods

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by a female interviewer with 40 young women (18-23 years old; 85% African American; 47.5% have children) following a month during which they were asked to use a microbicide surrogate (a commercially available vaginal moisturizer [VM]) with each coitus. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Atlas ti 5.0. Content analysis identified salient themes related to use and non-use of moisturizer.

Results

Four overarching themes were identified. The first theme – Acceptability – showed substantial variability: 25 women evaluated VM as “okay” or neutral, 7 assessed it very positively, 5 had overtly negative evaluations and 3 did not use it. The second theme, perceptions of male partners' assessments, also varied. Partners' perceptions of VM were neutral (n = 15),

positive (n = 13), negative (2), 2 did not use it, and 8 male partners were unaware of the VM use. The third theme, relationship quality, impacted women's use of the moisturizer. VM use for women in more established relationships with better inter-partner communication tended to be higher, while covert VM use was more common in casual relationships. The fourth theme, traditional gender and power dynamics, showed that perceived partners' reactions substantially influenced VM use, with positive evaluations increasing the likelihood of use (regardless of acceptability to the woman) and negative partner evaluations decreased VM use. Relationship dynamics affected women's ability to introduce VM into sexual situations, to negotiate use of the product, and determined comfort level with covert use potential.

Conclusions

The data show that vaginal microbicides may not fulfill the need for woman-controlled STD prevention since use of a microbicide proxy was influenced by partner attitudes and relationship characteristics. Most microbicide acceptability research has been conducted without consideration of the dyadic interaction between sex partners, ignoring the complex gender and power structures often exhibited in young women's relationships. Detailed understanding of these issues is essential for successful microbicide-related social marketing, education, and use.

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