NONOXYNOL-9:  What is it, and why you should avoid it.

Nonoxynol-9 (N-9) was initially developed as a spermicide, a chemical substance that prevents pregnancy by killing sperm. It is the most commonly used spermicide in the world. In laboratory studies, N-9 also acts as a microbicide by killing viruses and bacteria. Up until recently, the use of N-9 was recommended to help protect against HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, as well as other sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s) such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis. There is now evidence from several studies that suggest that Nonoxynol-9 does not reduce the risk of infection with HIV and other STD’s, and may in fact increase the risk. It is believed that N-9 causes irritation in the vagina that can lead to small cuts and tears. Such openings in the skin can make it even easier for the HIV virus to enter the body.

Nonoxynol-9 is available without a prescription and comes in a number of forms including creams, foams, gels and creams that can be inserted into the vagina. Some products are Advantage24 gel, Delfen foam, and VCF, vaginal contraceptive film. N-9 is also found in almost half the lubricated condoms sold in this country. Any product that contains N-9 should be indicated on the label.

Currently, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are advising that products with N-9 should not be promoted.

The Food and Drug Administration has proposed new warnings for products with N-9 which would state that the use of contraceptives containing N-9 can increase vaginal irritation, which may increase the risk of transmitting STD’s. The agency has been requesting public comment about the proposed labeling changes.

Research is now being done to find new spermicides and microbicides that will be effective and safe.

How can you protect yourself?

Short of total abstinence from sexual activity, latex condoms, used each and every time, offer the best possible protection from HIV and other STD’s. Try to avoid condoms with Nonoxynol 9. For those who may be allergic to latex, both male and female condoms are available in polyurethane. These condoms are thinner than latex, yet stronger. These condoms have not yet been fully tested to see how they protect against STD’s. Condoms made from lambskin (“natural skin”) will not protect you against HIV and other STD’s.

When using condoms, it is important that they be used each and every time you engage in sexual activity. Be sure to store them in a cool place away from sunlight. Do not use them if they appear brittle or discolored. Always check the expiration date. Never use more than one condom at a time or use a male and female condom together. This will increase the chances of breakage.

Making sure that you use adequate lubrication will also help decrease the chances of breakage. It is important to use water-based lubricants such as K-Y Jelly. Using oil-based lubricants such as Vaseline, baby oil, or lotion can break down the condom. Laboratory tests have shown that using mineral oil can cause a 90 percent decline in the condom’s strength in just under a minute.