



The Dapivirine vaginal ring: A new HIV prevention tool tailored for women

Thirty six years of the AIDS epidemic, HIV prevention methods and tools are still wanting for women! Many of these methods are limited because they require male cooperation which limits women's HIV prevention efforts since it affects their bargaining power for safer sex.

The International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA) is happy to learn that two large studies have promising results about the safety and effectiveness of the monthly dapivirine vaginal ring when used for HIV prevention by women.

The two studies – The Ring Study and A Study to Prevent Infection with a Ring for Extended Use (ASPIRE) tested the safety and efficacy of the vaginal ring and enrolled over 4,500 women in Malawi, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The Dapivirine ring was found to reduce the risk of HIV infection by 30% among women in general. For women who are older than 21 years, the ring was found to reduce HIV risk by 60%.

The dapivirine ring, which women insert, and leave in place for one month during which time it keeps on releasing ARV medication (dapivirine) slowly to prevent HIV infection among HIV negative women is the first long-acting ARV-based product to enter efficacy testing and the first involving an ARV other than tenofovir or a tenofovir combination.

The results are promising but more research needs to be done to ensure that the level of effectiveness and safety is higher among women below 21 years.

“This is a major step and breakthrough towards having female-controlled HIV prevention methods for women and girls. The advantage with the vaginal ring is that it is discreet. No one needs to know or will know that you are using it. So for women at high risk of HIV for example young women and girls, sex workers and women in violent relationships, the vaginal ring is a good solution especially when the efficacy and safety levels are higher,” says Lillian Mworeko, Executive Director, ICWEA.

The dapivirine ring also provides HIV negative women with a practical method that they can use to protect themselves against HIV. The ring compared to other tools offers a longer time of protection against HIV. Besides, it is consistent and easy to use.

“In order to curb the rate of HIV infections in young African women, we need to find a prevention method that is easily incorporated into their lives. The dapivirine ring has enormous potential to be that method,” said Thesla Palanee, Ph.D., ASPIRE protocol co-chair



who also directed the study at her own institution, the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI) in Johannesburg, South Africa.

UNAIDS statistics show that there are more than 36.9 million people living with HIV and more than half of these are women. Women also account for nearly 60 percent of adults living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and unprotected heterosexual sex is the leading cause of this the epidemic. Young women are especially vulnerable — women ages 15 to 24 are twice as likely as young men to be infected with HIV, we need to provide the women with means and tools to reduce their HIV infection rate.

The HIV prevalence rate in Uganda is 7.3%, it is higher, at 8.3%, among women (Ministry of Health, 2011). One in every four new infections among women aged 15-49 years in Uganda occur in adolescents and young women aged 15-24 years.

There is therefore crucial to explore why the ring results do not look as promising among younger women below 21 years who based on statistics show need the HIV prevention tools the most. There is need to study the behaviour of the women below 21 years use the data to come with solutions on how they too can be protected by the ring.

Jacquelyne Alesi, the Executive Director of Uganda Network of Young People Living with HIV/AIDS supplements saying, “Young women and girls continue to be ignored in the HIV response even though statistics show that new infections are highest among them. The world cannot win the fight against AIDS without young people on board so efforts should be made to ensure that the dapivirine ring is as effective and safe to be used by young women aged below the age of 21 as it is in older women. Progress in reducing the new infection will only be made if no one is left behind.”

ICWEA calls upon stake holders to invest more to increase effectiveness and safety levels and eventually add their weight towards speeding up the approval processes, making the product affordable and available to all women, especially those at an increased risk of HIV infection like young women, adolescents girls and sex workers.

There is need to invest more in research upon which we can come up with better ways to bring an end to the AIDS epidemic like has been demonstrated by the two studies.

Countries with a high HIV burden like Uganda should embrace the new tools and approaches that have been found to be safe and effective in HIV prevention to scale up the fight against AIDS.

Note to the editors

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About the dapivirine vaginal rings

Vaginal rings are flexible products that fit comfortably high inside the vagina and provide sustained delivery of drugs over a period of time. Women can insert and replace the ring themselves. These rings are already used in many countries to deliver hormonal contraception. The dapivirine vaginal ring adapts the same medical technology but uses an ARV instead of contraception as a way to offer women potentially long-acting protection against HIV. In the future, the ring can have a combination of drugs that prevent HIV infection, sexually transmitted infections and even be used as a contraception.

About the studies

ASPIRE is one of the two first large-scale clinical trials of a vaginal ring for HIV prevention. ASPIRE began enrolling women in trial in August 2012 and follow-up of all participants was completed on June 25, 2015. ASPIRE was launched by the Microbicide Trials Network (MTN) and enrolled 2,629 women in Malawi, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The study indicates that women in the study used their assigned ring monthly for at least one year. Those who enrolled earlier in the study had used their assigned ring for up to 34 months at the time they exited the study.

The Ring Study began in April 2012 and enrolled 1,959 women at seven research centers - six in South Africa and one in Uganda. Unlike ASPIRE, women enrolled in The Ring Study are asked to remain in the study for two years because one of the study's main objectives is to evaluate the long-term safety of the ring. Efficacy and preliminary safety results of The Ring Study are also expected late 2016. The Ring Study was sponsored by the International Partnership for Microbicides (IPM).

About ICWEA

The International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa is a membership based organisation in five countries. ICWEA is a unique organisation by and for women living with HIV with a mandate to advocate for the rights of women living with HIV.

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