

CONDOMS STILL MATTER IN PREVENTING HIV, STIs

As couples around Eswatini celebrate Valentine's Day with romance and intimacy, it is imperative that they protect one another from HIV, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies. While chocolates and roses set the mood, condoms play a crucial role in ensuring that passion doesn't come with unintended consequences. With Valentine's Day often linked with increased sexual activity, it is also a time when STIs, and unplanned pregnancies and sometimes HIV infections see a spike, hence promoting safe sex practices, especially condom use is more important than ever.

One important fact that most couples might not be aware of is that Valentine's Day is preceded by the International Condom Day commemorated every year on the 13th of February. During this day health organizations, activists, and communities come together to promote safer sex, sexual health education, and the importance of contraception. Celebrated annually on the eve of Valentine's Day, the day serves as a timely reminder of the role condoms play in preventing HIV infections, STIs and unplanned pregnancies.

At its core, International Condom Day is more than just about contraception, it's a celebration of sexual health, personal choice, and responsibility. By breaking taboos, promoting open discussions, and ensuring accessibility, the day plays a crucial role in building a healthier, safer world for everyone. So, whether you're in a relationship or single, young or old, on International Condom Day, take a moment to "Wrap It Up Right" and join the movement for safer sex!

In the fight against HIV and other STIs, one simple tool remains at the forefront: **THE CONDOM**. Despite medical advancements like antiretroviral therapy (ART) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), experts stress that condoms continue to be the most affordable, accessible, and effective method of preventing the spread of HIV. This is one of the reasons why Emaswati are encouraged to use all HIV prevention methods together being PrEP, Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision and Condoms.

Condoms have been a crucial part of HIV prevention in Eswatini since the early days of the epidemic. When used correctly and consistently, condoms are estimated to be 98% effective in preventing HIV transmission. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), condoms work by creating a physical barrier that prevents the virus from passing between sexual partners. Unlike some other prevention methods that rely on medication, condoms offer instant protection without requiring a prescription or medical supervision.

For years, condoms have played a crucial role in reducing the transmission of STIs, including HIV. They serve as a physical barrier that prevents the

exchange of bodily fluids, the primary pathway through which HIV is transmitted.

Despite this, condom use is not as prevalent as it should be. Multiple factors contribute to this, including misconceptions about their efficacy, lack of access, and socio-cultural stigmas. Some people erroneously believe that condoms detract from sexual pleasure, while others face barriers such as partner resistance or concerns about confidentiality when obtaining them.

Why Condoms Still Matter in 2025

With the rise of PrEP and HIV treatment, some have questioned whether condoms are still necessary. However, health professionals warn against relying solely on medication for HIV prevention. Here's why condoms remain essential:

- *Protection Against Multiple STIs* – Unlike PrEP, which only prevents HIV, condoms also reduce the risk of gonorrhoea, chlamydia, syphilis, and other STIs.
- *No Side Effects* – While PrEP and ART can cause side effects like nausea or liver issues, condoms have no systemic effects.
- *Cost-Effective and Widely Available* – Free or low-cost condoms are distributed by governments, NGOs, and pharmacies worldwide, making them the most accessible prevention tool.
- *Encourages Safer Sexual Practices* – Promoting condom use fosters a culture of responsibility and awareness in sexual health.

Tackling Myths, Misconceptions and Stigma

Despite their effectiveness, many people still avoid using condoms due to misconceptions and stigma. Some believe that condoms reduce pleasure or that they aren't necessary in long-term relationships. However, health experts emphasize that modern condom designs, including ultra-thin, ribbed, and lubricated options, ensure both safety and enjoyment.

Furthermore, education campaigns continue to normalize condom use, especially among young people and at-risk populations. International initiatives like International Condom Day (February 13) and World AIDS Day (December 1) focus on breaking taboos and reinforcing the importance of protection.

The Future of HIV Prevention: A Multi-Layered Approach

While condoms remain the gold standard, experts agree that combining prevention strategies is the key to reducing HIV rates worldwide.

Comprehensive sex education, access to PrEP, regular testing, and stigma reduction efforts all work together with condom use to create a safer sexual environment.

As HIV research advances, vaccines and long-term treatments may eventually change the landscape of prevention. However, for now, the message from health professionals is clear: ***Condoms are still the most effective and accessible tool in the fight against HIV.*** So, whether you're in a committed relationship or exploring new connections, make protection a priority because safety should never be optional.

Education remains vital to addressing these challenges. Awareness campaigns play an essential role in dispelling myths and promoting the benefits of condoms. Education should not just focus on the mechanics of condom use but also address the underlying issues such as negotiating use with partners and overcoming embarrassment. Moreover, governments and organizations must ensure that condoms are readily accessible to all segments of the population, especially in areas heavily impacted by HIV.

Seeing the challenges and the decline in condom use in Eswatini, the government of the Kingdom through the Ministry of Health and NERCHA have commissioned organisations like the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) to go back to the people to encourage those who are sexually active to use condoms. In commemorating this year's International Condom Day, AHF Eswatini will host a roadshow on the 22nd of February 2025 at Kwaluseni Inkhundla.