

Condoms and lubricants in the time of COVID-19

Sustaining supplies and people-centred approaches to meet the need in low- and middle-income countries

A short brief on actions, April 2020



The aim of this brief is to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic does not disrupt the supply of and demand generation for condoms. Sexual relations may be transformed in the new context of the pandemic, but they have not stopped. While access to male and female condoms has been critical in the global response to reduce HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies over the past three decades, these gains can be lost if condoms are not included in the essential commodities that are freely available to populations during the lockdown of countries. This brief for country condom programme managers and experts provides a summary of relevant actions to sustain supplies of male condoms, female condoms and lubricants, and to adjust approaches for condom promotion during the time of COVID-19.

Sustaining condom and lubricant supply

The disruption of economic activities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic will have far reaching implications for the provision, accessibility and security of supplies for sexual, reproductive, HIV and other health. The global condom supply and distribution is no exception, but thus far, condoms have neither been regarded as essential commodities nor received enough attention in contingency planning for COVID-19. Increased incidence of HIV, STIs and unintended pregnancies are risks that will affect women and young people and, in particular, members of key populations, who already face increased vulnerability in a crisis such as this. UNAIDS and the United Nations

Population Fund (UNFPA) emphasize the need to ensure the continuity of condom supply, distribution and promotion, and they are actively working with partners to sustain condom programming throughout the crisis.

In this context, it is critical to include condoms and lubricants as part of essential commodity security plans. More specifically, it is important to understand and address the country-specific implications of several new challenges to the condom and lubricant supply chain.

- **Sustain condom production.** The production of condoms could slow if the governments of countries where condoms are manufactured decide to shut down factories, halt commercial and logistics activities, or close their borders. Procurement agencies and governments need to ensure an uninterrupted, sustainable supply of reproductive health and HIV products, including condoms that are of the required quality. This will require risk analysis and draft contingency planning that involves several condom manufacturers located in different countries.
- **Factor in delays in processing shipments.** The lockdowns of countries where condom manufacturers are located have dramatically impacted the capacity of freight forwarders to arrange shipments and transport condoms to their final destinations. Worldwide ocean freight continues to be constrained, with some ports in destination countries working at limited capacity, while others are closed. Some countries have implemented quarantine for shipments, which means that the cargo will be kept in a warehouse at the port, delaying the custom clearance process. Additional challenges include

selective approval of cargo, numerous stranded containers, cancelled flights, increased and unpredictable transportation prices, decreased freight options, the inability to quote for specific destinations, cargo waiting for open shipping slots, and the first indications of congestion at ports and warehouses.

- **Assess current condom stock levels.** In the current volatile situation, it is critical to assess the stock of male and female condoms and lubricants in central medical stores and decentralized warehouses on a monthly basis in order to prevent situations of low stock. Countries are encouraged to have a minimum buffer stock of nine months of supply, while sub-national distribution points and facilities should keep at least a six-month supply.
- **Ensure condoms are part of essential health commodity deliveries.** Some countries in different regions have imposed curfews and inland transport is affected. This is having negative consequences for the distribution of goods. It is critical that condoms are included on delivery trucks going out to health facilities, shops, community mobilizers, dispensers and other post-facility distribution points.

Providing people-centered access to condoms and lubricants

It is anticipated that condom access will be disrupted when community outreach is no longer possible. It is critical that condoms are considered essential items that must remain accessible during city and country lockdowns.

- **Respond to the needs of key populations, young people and other vulnerable groups.** As part of broader assessments of HIV service access among key and vulnerable populations in the time of COVID-19, condom and lubricant access issues should be assessed separately. Population-specific solutions should be developed in consultation with the relevant communities and their networks.
- **Sustain condom access through private sector outlets.** It is important to ensure that supermarkets, pharmacies, and other shops and kiosks that are open to provide essential food and other supplies integrate the distribution of condoms and lubricants into their services. This is particularly important in contexts where access

to other contraceptives is constrained due to the COVID-19 response.

- **Deliver through community service points that can support physical distancing.** At times of closure of (some) shops, condom dispensers should be placed in critical spots to facilitate community access to male and female condoms and lubricants. Moreover, the involvement of the community will help identify the optimum placement of these spots and greatly increase not only the availability and resupply of condoms and lubricant, but also the ease of access to them. The COVID-19 prevention measures should be fully reflected in these distribution strategies at all times.
- **Define condoms, lubricants and other contraceptives as essential within health facilities.** It is critical to keep condoms available in health facilities and other service delivery points where people expect to find them. Where there is a risk that collecting condoms in health facilities may put people at risk of COVID-19, avoid guidance that discourages condom uptake in health facilities. Instead, ensure that condoms are accessible in a way that does not put people into close contact with other patients, such as through distribution boxes near the entrance.
- **Strengthen multimonth dispensing of condoms and lubricants.** In order to minimize travel and visits to health facilities and shops, multimonth dispensing of condoms and lubricants should be considered (where it is not already in place). Providing three months of condoms and lubricants to users is a good practice under normal circumstances, and it should be considered as a minimum during times of physical distancing. Providing supplies in line with the needs of users should be considered (where needed), but it is important to make such decisions in line with the national stock situation. Restrictions to the number of condoms provided per service contact—as they are sometimes reported for sex workers and others—should be avoided, and multimonth supplies should be provided based on individual need.
- **Establish a clear firewall between condom access and the prosecution of physical distancing policies.** Even where physical distancing policies do not allow for people to meet, these rules should not be used to criminalize sex and restrict condom access. Such measures would not prevent the spread

of the virus responsible for COVID-19, but it may increase transmission of other infections. There is a need for a clear firewall between the provision of quality health services like condoms and lubricants on the one hand and measures of physical distancing on the other. Nobody should be prosecuted for carrying condoms and lubricants or denied access to them based on physical distancing policies.

- **Include condoms in emergency support services as necessary.** Food deliveries for vulnerable households or deliveries of masks and other equipment to health facilities could include the delivery of condoms and other HIV and health commodities in contexts where existing supply chains have collapsed.

Innovative demand generation for condoms

Existing media-based demand generation for condoms—where it exists—should continue with messaging that is adjusted as needed. The same applies to condom promotion for triple protection from HIV, STIs and pregnancy as part of relevant health services (such as contraceptive service delivery, HIV testing and other services). In addition, the current situation provides opportunities for innovation in the following ways and areas.

- **Strengthen the promotion of condoms through new media.** Commonly used Internet platforms could be approached to provide public health messages on preventing COVID-19, HIV and STIs, including using male and female condoms and lubricants.
- **Increase the use of online condom demonstration videos and tutorials.** Creative videos promoting condom use and related skills are available online. It is useful to promote access to quality videos from trusted organizations in your local language (or to adapt examples of videos on **male condoms** and **female condoms** from trusted organizations in other countries).
- **Strengthen condom promotion through social media, including dating apps.** As the uptake of social media and dating apps increases, there is an opportunity to assess media landscapes to determine which communication platforms and dating apps are most relevant to promote condom messages for different communities and

to provide information on where condoms and lubricants can be accessed easily.

- **Explore online ordering systems for free and subsidized condoms and lubricants.** Where available, online shops are increasingly used by consumers during physical distancing. In low-income settings, online orders remain out of reach for most people, but new approaches could be explored to increase access. Online ordering systems for free condoms have been used in other contexts, including for young people, and subsidized rates for public health products such as condoms could be negotiated with providers during this time of crisis.

Remain proactive in managing condom programmes as part of wider HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights responses

Although condoms and lubricants may not be the focus at the time of COVID-19, it is important to remain active in managing condom programmes within broader HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights responses, and to explore linkages with other existing programmes as part of the COVID-19 response. Additional measures to sustain condom supply and demand may require additional resources, and if those are not available in-country, it is critical to approach international partners like UNFPA and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for support.

For further information on and beyond condoms, please see:

- **Global HIV Prevention Coalition statement on COVID-19.**
- **COVID-19 and people living with HIV.**
- **Strategic considerations for mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on key-population-focused HIV programs.**
- An example of a city's guidance on safe **sex and COVID-19** (from New York City).