

HOW VAGINAL RING IS PROTECTING WOMEN AGAINST HIV

By Agnes Kyotalengerire

Jane Alochi, 19, adjusts her three-month-old baby as she begins to breastfeed. A resident of Laroo village in Gulu district, Alochi says she started using the Dapivirine vaginal ring (DPV-VR) to protect herself against acquiring HIV from her husband.

The couple discovered they were discordant in March during an antenatal visit to Lightray Health Centre II. Her husband was started on antiretroviral therapy. Alochi, however, was not offered oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

HEALTHY BABY

Despite continuing sexual relations during pregnancy, Alochi remained HIV-negative. In June, she delivered a healthy baby and in September, she opted for the vaginal ring. Each month, before the insertion of a new ring, she is tested for HIV.

Mary Tibakunirwa, 21, from Nyantugo village in Kyenjojo district, is also all praises for the vaginal ring. A hawker and mother of two, she separated from her partner years ago and turned to casual sexual relationships. Initially, she used oral PrEP, but she found it burdensome.

"When people see you swallow the pills every day, they might mistake them for ARVs," she explains.

Nausea added to her discomfort. When the vaginal ring was introduced this year, she switched immediately. Four

months later, she is still HIV-negative.

Alochi and Tibakunirwa are among hundreds of women who have embraced the vaginal ring as a discreet tool of protection.

GOVERNMENT ROLLOUT

In February, Uganda received 2,400 Dapivirine vaginal rings (DPV-VR) to safeguard 200 women. An additional 24,000 rings are expected at the end of the year.

The DPV-VR is the first vaginal HIV prevention product, designed to protect women. According to the World Health Organisation, the silicone ring is worn inside the vagina for 28 days, slowly releasing Dapivirine, an antiretroviral drug. After four weeks, a new ring has to be inserted. Studies show it offers 35-60% protection against HIV for women.

Noteworthy is that the ring only protects against HIV during penetrative vaginal sex, explains Dr Herbert Kadama, the national PrEP co-ordinator at the Ministry of Health.

It does not prevent transmission through anal sex, sharing sharp instruments or other routes, he cautions.

The rings were distributed to four facilities: MARPI Clinic at Mulago Hospital, Kasensero Health Centre IV in Masaka, Kyenjojo Hospital, and Bugembe Health Centre IV in Jinja. Recruitment focused on women at high risk, that is, those in discordant relationships,

those in multiple relationships and HIV-negative sex workers. The recipients do not have to pay for the ring.

Christine Akwiya, the officer in charge of the prevention clinic at Gulu Regional Referral Hospital, says her facility received 132 rings. Priority is given to adolescents, young women and those unable to adhere to oral PrEP. Screening ensures eligibility.

The rollout of the Dapivirine vaginal ring followed a demonstration project at seven sites countrywide. These sites were Mbarara municipality clinic, also commonly referred to as Mbarara Health Centre IV and Bufunda HC III in western Uganda. Those in eastern region were Mabaka HCIV in Malaba district, Bisoni HC III in Tororo district and at Namakwekwe HC III in Mbale district. In northern Uganda, the rings were distributed at Gulu and Kitgum hospitals.

UPTAKE

Despite initial interest, uptake has been slow. Vincent Atuhairwe, a nurse at Kyenjojo Hospital, says many women lose interest after seeing the size and texture of the ring. Some users complain of discomfort and return to oral PrEP or switch to injectable Cabotegravir, that is available at limited facilities.

Dapivirine vaginal rings

The DPV-VR is the first vaginal HIV prevention product, designed to protect women
Source: World Health Organisation



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HIV BURDEN AMONG GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

The urgency of interventions that impact women is backed by data on how they are disproportionately affected by HIV compared to men.

According to the 2025 national HIV estimates report, of the 1.5 million Ugandans living with HIV, about 930,000 are girls and women, compared to 570,000 boys and men. The same report shows that of the 14,000 new infections among young people aged 15-24 last year, nearly 70% were adolescent girls and young women. By contrast, only 17% of new infections were among boys and uncircumcised men engaging in unsafe sexual practices.

UNAIDS data reveals that across Africa, including Uganda, 3,100 girls and young women are infected every week. Among those aged 15-24, three out of four new infections occur in girls. Narrowing further to ages 15-19, six out of seven new infections are among girls.

A total of 1.3 million people who are living with HIV are on treatment.

Last year, the country recorded 37,000 new infections, with 20,000 succumbing to AIDS-related deaths.

CALLS FOR EDUCATION

The ring is a valuable addition to the HIV fight, but limited by availability and lack of public awareness, according to Naomi Mbareeba, the executive director of Women's Network for Human Rights Advocacy.

She adds that women should be educated that the ring does not prevent pregnancy, thus they should also use contraceptives.

Dr Daniel Byamukama, the

head of HIV prevention at the Uganda AIDS Commission, acknowledges that education and uptake are inadequate.

"The few rings we currently have are not even fully used. If available rings are not utilised, it is difficult to argue that demand is high," he says.

Although a rollout policy exists, low budgets have hindered nationwide availability, says Milly Katana, the head of the

Movement of Women Living with HIV in Uganda.

The current supplies, Byamukama explains, were funded through USAID-MOSAIC project, a donor. However, the supplies are limited, thus without government investment, national awareness campaigns cannot be launched.

"You cannot invite a crowd for a meal when you only have food for three people," he remarks.

Byamukama emphasises that HIV disproportionately affects women, largely because most prevention tools depend on male co-operation. The vaginal ring is one of the few tools women can use independently.

"It should be promoted and funded by government as a pro-women tool that empowers women and reduces HIV's impact on them," Byamukama says.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Despite decades of awareness campaigns and medical advances, adolescent girls and young women remain disproportionately affected by HIV. The vaginal ring offers hope, but its success depends on availability, acceptability and education.

Elsewhere in Africa, the vaginal ring has been rolled out for use in South Africa, Zambia and Kenya.

NEWS ON CAMERA

The Uganda Security Printing Company team, led by the board chairman, Prof. Muhammed Ngoma (second-right), Victor Ahimbisibwe (right) and Martin Sekajja (left) deliver a collection of essential healthcare items including hospital mattresses, bedsheets, blankets, children's items and food to the emergency and burns wards of Kiruddu Hospital recently. The items were received by Caroline Kibone, the overseer of the emergency section (centre) and Florence Ayo, the principal nursing officer

