

ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF THE BARRIERS TO CONDOM USE: THE WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

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This study was done to identify the barriers to condom use as experienced by a sample of women aged 15-49 years inclusive attending the General Medical (CUR) and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) clinics at two urban public health centres in St. James and Kingston & St. Andrew, Jamaica. A structured interviewer-administered questionnaire was applied to 267 respondents. Two (2) focus group discussions were conducted with women of the same target group.

The findings show that while the women's knowledge of HIV/AIDS and the effectiveness of condoms was generally high, and most of them had positive attitudes and beliefs with respect to condom use, the majority did not use condoms consistently with either their regular or non-regular partners. Several women did not perceive a need to use condoms as they felt safe in their relationships - had only one partner, lived with the partner, and/or trusted the partner. Others cited partner refusal or the anticipation of negative response from the partner if they requested condom use. In addition, for some women, there were physical barriers to condom use - genital itching and irritation, dislike of how condoms feel and/or smell and the experience of decrease in sexual pleasure.

About 47% of the women studied self reported a history of sexually transmitted infection (STI), with 50% reporting a history of STI in the preceding 12 months. These women with low condom use behaviour and risky sexual practices are at high risk of HIV/AIDS.

The challenge, therefore, is for condom use promotion messages to be developed which target the women in particular. These should teach them proper HIV/STI risk assessment and condom use negotiation skills. They should also seek to educate the women as to how to overcome some of the physical barriers to condom use while still practising safer sex.

Keywords: Diahann Adriene Dale; barriers; condom use; women's perspective