Put a Ring on It

The AIDS Foundation of Chicago's new campaign promotes the FC2, the second-generation female condom. But it's not just for the single ladies—men who have sex with men can use it too.

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When we think of the great city of Chicago, a few things spring to mind. Deep-dish pizza. The Cubs. Michael Jordan. Heck, even our president. But the Windy City is fast becoming known for something else entirely these days: its staunch support of female condoms.

On March 10, National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, a coalition of AIDS service organizations, reproductive rights advocates and sexual health pioneers launched the Chicago Female Condom Campaign's "Put a Ring on It!" initiative to build public support for the second generation female condom, the FC2, approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) early last year.

If this campaign's slogan sounds familiar, that's because it was inspired by one of last year's biggest hit songs, Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)." While the tune was burning up the charts more than a year ago (when the campaign was in the development stage), it still resonates in Chi-Town.

"Using this little nugget of pop culture makes this campaign something that's catchy and something people are going to take notice of," says Jessica Terlikowski, policy manager at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC), one of many organizations in the Chicago region that pushed for FDA passage of the FC2 last year. "It enables us to talk about female condoms in a way that they haven't been talked about before."

While female condoms have been on the market for some time (the FDA approved the FC1 in 1993), they have been criticized for being uncomfortable and too expensive. The newer version, the FC2, is made of a hypo-allergenic synthetic rubber called nitrile, which can be used with any kind of lubricant whereas male condoms, made out of latex, can only be used with a water-based lube. Like male condoms, the FC2 is manufactured using a dipping method, making it seamless, while the FC1 was made using two pieces of polyurethane that have been melded together.

Where does the "ring" come in? Female condoms are open-ended tubes just as male condoms are, but the key difference is that female condoms have two rings—one on each end. Before sex, the receptive partner inserts the smaller of the two rings of the FC2 into the vagina or anus so that the

outer ring protrudes. The inner ring can be removed for anal sex, whether the insertive partners are women or men who have sex with men (MSM). The idea that the FC2 is a safe and effective option for both women and MSM is one of the cornerstones of the Chicago Female Condom Campaign.

“It’s unfortunate that it’s called the female condom, because it’s really a condom option for all receptive partners,” says David Munar, vice president of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. “Our campaign has an explicit section [describing] how the female condom can be used for anal intercourse and among gay men, recognizing that we can offer a new choice for men who think the male condom is cumbersome or who simply want to try something new.”

In addition to promoting female condom use, the Chicago Female Condom Campaign is also dedicated to giving HIV/AIDS and reproductive health service providers the tools they need to educate clients about its efficacy as well as demonstrate how to use it.

“We’re doing provider training about once a month,” Terlikowski explains. “And we’re working with the Chicago Department of Public Health to publicize the fact that different STI clinics around the city have female condoms available.”

Chicago has yet to implement the type of citywide female condom distribution program that Washington, DC, did in March, making the district—with support from the M·A·C AIDS Fund—the first U.S. city to implement a sweeping female condom initiative. However, this campaign is pushing more area drug stores to make female condoms available at lower prices, and it has established a pool purchasing program to help service providers distribute them at no cost. In cooperation with the Female Health Company, the sole manufacturer of the female condom, AFC and its partners have been able to purchase FC2s in bulk.

“Smaller agencies—and, really, any agency that’s willing to distribute condoms for free—can access them for $755 per 1,000,” Terlikowski says. “That’s about 75 cents apiece, which is cheaper than agencies are able to get them through distributors.”

The campaign, anchored by its website ringonit.org, has received an overwhelmingly positive response both locally and nationally, with organizations across the country requesting campaign materials. The “Put a Ring on It!” initiative has even been recognized by the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History, which is considering highlighting the campaign in its medical collection.

“Whenever female condoms are being provided and there is education that accompanies distribution, women and men use them,” Terlikowski says. “This is something that we have right here, right now, that we can put into the hands of women and men and say ‘This is a way for you to take control of your own health.’ And that’s powerful.”

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