Micro Managing

A new gel to empower women

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Condom technology has come a long way since the days when papyrus and animal intestines were used as prophylactics. But an ancient gender imbalance remains: Women's sexual safety still depends on their ability to get men to use protection. Now researchers at the University of Utah, proving that (small) size does matter, have developed a molecular female condom. After being inserted into the vagina, the "smart" microbicide gel or suppository thickens in the presence of semen, forming a polymer shield to stop HIV, and releases antiviral drugs. Created by Dr. Patrick Kiser, a bioengineering professor at the university, and a group of postdoctorate students there, the product is years away from the market. But for women wanting discreet control over their sexual health, the prospect is encouraging; especially in developing countries where the need for female-controlled STD prevention and contraception is greatest. "Even [in the U.S.]," Kiser says, "after one migrates out of condom use in a relationship, it's difficult to negotiate condom use because it implies distrust." He also wishes more of his colleagues would confront women's health. "When male physical scientists run into the word *vagina* they are often turned off." Thankfully, trailblazers like Kiser are finally giving the vagina the attention it deserves.

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