

Despite Media Claims, Condoms Don't Prevent STDs

Steve Cable

If terrorists were caught attempting to manipulate the environment at America's colleges and universities so that 85 percent of all coeds would graduate infected with a life threatening virus, they would be vilified and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Many media reports on a recent study about the effectiveness of condom use in deterring the spread of HPV have the potential to produce the same result. Irresponsible and/or ignorant journalism producing a false sense of security may be able to accomplish what the most sophisticated terrorist operation would be unable to pull off.

Human papilloma virus (HPV)—which can cause cervical cancer, genital warts and vaginal, vulvar, anal and penile cancers—is the most common sexually transmitted disease, infecting about 80 percent of young women within five years of becoming sexually active. One of the arguments for abstinence prior to marriage is that condoms have not been shown to be effective in protecting against HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases. A new study report, published in the June 22 edition of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, is titled "Condom Use and the Risk of Genital Human Papillomavirus Infection in Young Women" [\[1\]](#). This study was structured to provide better information on the impact of male condom use on the likelihood of women contracting HPV.

What new insights are gained from this study on the relationship of condom use and HPV? The most important result is that sexually active college women whose male partners used condoms 100 percent of the time (both with the women in the study and with other sexual partners) have roughly a 38 percent chance of contracting HPV within the first year of becoming sexually active. [\[2\]](#) If she has at least one different partner per year for four years, the probability that she will

leave college with an HPV infection is greater than 85 percent. The obvious conclusion of the study is that **condom use is not an effective means of preventing HPV.**

The study did find that sexually active college women whose male partners used condoms less than 100 percent of the time had a probability of contracting HPV within the first year of becoming sexually active ranging from 62 percent to virtually 100 percent depending upon the regularity of condom use by their male partners. Although the study does show that male condom use did reduce the probability of sexually active women contracting HPV, it did not reduce it to a level that any thinking person would consider safe. Based on the study results, it is reasonable to conclude that any woman who is sexually active with multiple partners during her college years will almost certainly contract HPV whether she ensures their partners use condoms or not.

One would expect the headlines for the media reports on this topic to read, "Condoms Shown to be Ineffective Against HPV." The body of the article would point out that these results vindicate the proponents' of abstinence emphasis in preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. However, the exact opposite is being purported by the media. Here are some samples from the headlines:

- **Condoms Reduce HPV Risk After All, Without Increasing Likelihood of Sex**

(American Council on Science and Health)

- **Condoms Proven to Protect Against Virus**

(Associated Press, *Yuma Sun*)

- **Condoms Reduce Risk of Cervical Cancer, Survey Says**

(*Dallas Morning News*, June 22, 2006)

These headlines take a half truth and present it in a way that is designed to further a political agenda while endangering the health of America's youth and

young adults. Even more dangerous is the first line of the Associated Press report, “For the first time, scientists have proof that condoms offer women **impressive protection** against the virus that causes cervical cancer.” I do not consider an 85 percent chance of catching the virus in four years impressive. I would consider it dismal! The AP report then adds insult to injury by including this quote from an obscure expert:

*That’s pretty awesome. There aren’t too many times when you can have an intervention that would offer **so much protection**, said Dr. Patricia Kloser, an infectious-disease specialist at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey who was not a part of the study.*

The use of the words “impressive protection” and “so much protection” in conjunction with the results of this study borders on criminal. We need to hold our journalists to task for such biased (or, in the best case, shoddy) reporting. Even more important, we need to get out the real conclusion supported by the study: Abstinence or a completely monogamous relationship is the only effective protection against sexually transmitted diseases. As Christians, we would point to marriage as the only valid venue for a monogamous relationship, but that is outside the scope of the study.

To determine the number of coeds at risk, we need to consider how many are sexually active. In order to participate in this study, the college coeds had to have refrained from vaginal intercourse prior to the two weeks preceding the start of the study. In other words, the participants were virgins at the beginning of the study. Over the three year study period, 45 percent of those originally enrolled remained virgins. According to a report from the U.S. Center for Disease Control [\[3\]](#), in 2002, 70 percent of never-married teens under the age of 18 had not engaged in sex. Taking the 55 percent from the study who started sexual activity in college with the 30 percent who were already sexually active, one would predict that 68.5 percent of college coeds would be sexually active. This

tracks well with the CDC data that 68 percent of never-married females have engaged in sex before they were 20. Thus, if coed sexual activity remains at the same level and 100 percent condom use is practiced, we can expect approximately 60 percent of college coeds to graduate with an HPV versus 68 percent with 50 percent condom usage. In contrast, if we could cut the number of sexually active coeds in half, the HPV infection rate among graduates could drop to 33 percent or less regardless of condom usage.

Notes

1. *New England Journal of Medicine*, Volume 354, June 22, 2006, Number 25, "Condom Use and the Risk of Genital Human Papillomavirus Infection in Young Women," Rachel L. Winer, Ph.D., James P. Hughes, Ph.D., Qinghua Feng, Ph.D., Sandra O'Reilly, B.S., Nancy B. Kiviat, M.D., King K. Holmes, M.D., Ph.D., and Laura A. Koutsky, Ph.D.
2. Study actually calculates rate per 100 hundred at risk years which is somewhat different than the probability of occurrence since some women reported multiple infections over the course of the study.
3. "Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing," 2002, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, December 2004.