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IRMA: Research on Lubricant Safety Very Past Due

PITTSBURGH, May 24 - Do some currently available lubricants used for anal sex actually make it easier for HIV to be transmitted?

The answer is: we don't know.

After years of persistent advocacy by IRMA (International Rectal Microbicide Advocates), brand new research from the Microbicide Trials Network, led Charlene Dezzutti, Ph.D., is beginning to answer this critical question.

Today at the 2010 International Microbicides Conference in Pittsburgh, Dezzutti presented the results of tests conducted with five of the most widely used lubricants, chosen from the results of an IRMA web-based survey that collected information on the lubricant preferences of nearly 9,000 men and women from over 100 countries. Dezzutti's findings indicated that some of the products studied had toxic effects on cells and rectal tissue.

"We know we can't make any conclusions based on this one small study," said IRMA Steering Committee member Marc-André LeBlanc who leads IRMA's lubricant safety advocacy. "Further research is absolutely necessary to understand the potential role of sexual lubricants in HIV transmission. We should be able to provide consumer guidance regarding lubes that are found to be safer than others."

In the meantime, it's important to note that lubricant availability tends to translate into higher rates of condom use among people who engage in anal intercourse. The use of condoms with condom-compatible lubricants remains the gold standard for preventing the sexual transmission of HIV.

"Some lubes are probably better than others, but we don't know where any of the currently available products fall along the spectrum from good to bad," stated Jim Pickett, IRMA Chair. "While we push for a safe and effective rectal microbicide, we must ensure that existing lubes don't facilitate HIV transmission. People have a right to this kind of information, and it's very past due."

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IRMA is a global network of advocates, scientists, policy makers and funders from six continents working together to advance a robust rectal microbicide research and development agenda. IRMA is based in the United States with chapters in Latin America and Nigeria. Currently in development, microbicides are products (cream, gel, or maybe a douche or an enema) that could be used to reduce a person's risk of HIV infection vaginally or rectally.