

'You'll always stay right': understanding vaginal products and the motivations for use among adolescent and young women in rural KZN

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Abstract

The use of vaginal products may increase the risk of HIV infection by affecting the vaginal biome. Understanding what vaginal products young women are using, and why, is key to assessing the complexity of sexual health and risk. This study reports on findings from research with adolescent and young women in rural KwaZulu-Natal about the vaginal products they use and motivations for using them. The study identified over 26 products that young women used to enhance their sexual experience and found some young women spent time preparing and sourcing vaginal products in order to pleasure and retain partners. Opinions differed about vaginal product use. While some women perceived that vaginal products could provide a means of out-performing other women, retaining a partner and providing sexual autonomy, there was a stigma attached to using them. Study findings highlight the social value of using vaginal products, especially in settings where partner retention is linked to economic survival. Expanding our understanding of what products are used and the reasons young women use them warrants continued investigation.

Background

Vaginal practices can potentially enhance the risk of HIV infection. While research has identified the use of vaginal products amongst women (McClelland et al. 2006; Scorgie et al. 2009; Smit et al. 2011; World Health Organization 2012), understanding what and how vaginal products are used by young women in different contexts remains important considering their risk of HIV infection. Globally, over four million young people aged 15–24 years are infected with HIV (UNAIDS 2016). Young women are at particularly high risk with around 25% of new HIV infections occurring in those aged 15–24 years in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Bekker and Hosek 2015; Shisana et al. 2012). Rural girls in KwaZulu-Natal are particularly vulnerable, with antenatal studies showing that women 16 years old or younger already have an 11.5% HIV prevalence (Abdool Karim, Baxter, and Birx 2017).

Research from multiple African countries suggests that the use of vaginal products is often motivated by a strong focus on hygiene, and ensuring that the enjoyment of sex is enhanced by drying, tightening or raising the vaginal temperature (Francis et al. 2013; Scorgie et al. 2009; World Health Organization 2012). There can be strong social motivations to use vaginal products and this is

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