

Safety of lubricants for rectal use: A fact sheet for HIV educators and advocates

Many men, women and transgender people use lubricants (lubes) during sexual intercourse. Yet we know very little about their safety when used during anal intercourse (AI).

Very few studies have examined the effect of lubes on human rectal tissue, but those that did showed mixed results. Most water-based lubes tested in these studies were shown to be damaging to rectal tissue. However, some lubes were more damaging than others. Furthermore, in one study the use of lube for AI was associated with the presence of rectal sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Based on current evidence:



- **More research is urgently needed to explore if there is a link between lube use and acquiring HIV and/or rectal STIs.**
- It is unclear whether any particular type or brand of lube might increase, decrease or have no effect on acquiring HIV and/or rectal STIs.
- Using male or female condoms is still considered the best way to prevent acquiring HIV and STIs during AI. In addition, the use of condom-compatible lubes has been associated with a decreased risk of condoms breaking or slipping.
- It is not possible at this time to recommend for or against using lubes if having AI without condoms.
- Lube use on its own is not a proven method of HIV or STI prevention.

Regulatory agencies in various countries classify lubes differently—as medical devices or cosmetics, for example. Typically they require no safety data on the rectal use of lubes in humans.

IRMA calls for more research into the safety of lubes for rectal use, including clarity on the impact of lube use on preventing or facilitating the acquisition of HIV and STIs, and which lubes/compounds to seek or avoid.

IRMA is aware of the likelihood that some of the first rectal microbicides will be available in gels with lube-like properties. Therefore, avoiding confusing messages about lube safety is paramount to avoid delays in access and use of an important public health tool later.

For further information, please consult IRMA's companion document: *Safety of lubricants for rectal use: Questions & Answers for HIV educators and advocates*.

To learn more about rectal microbicides and advocacy to make them a reality, visit IRMA's [website](#).