How effective are condoms at reducing the risk of herpes simplex virus 2 (HSV-2)?

It is widely known that consistent and correct condom use reduces the risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), but until recently questions remained about condom’s effectiveness against HSV-2. Results from a recent study led by Emily T. Martin, M.P.H., Ph.D. of Children’s Hospital Research Institute and University of Washington in Seattle, published in *Archives of Internal Medicine*, now offer evidence that condom use does reduce the risk of transmitting HSV-2.

Martin and her colleagues performed a pooled analysis of six prior studies, including “three HSV-2 vaccine studies, an HSV-2 drug study, a sexually transmitted infection (STI) incidence study and a behavioral STI intervention study.” Study participants were mostly male (66%) and very few reported having a prior STI. Additionally, the majority of participants were white (60.4%), heterosexual (94.1%) with an average age of twenty-nine.

Of the 5,384 participants who tested negative for HSV-2 at the onset of the study, 415 subsequently tested positive for HSV-2 during follow-up. The significant difference between those that became infected during the study and those who did not? Consistent condom use. Indeed, the study found that consistent condom use lowered the risk of acquiring HSV-2 by 30% compared to those not using condoms. As the study authors state, “Risk of HSV-2 acquisition decreased by 7 percent for every additional 25 percent of the time that condoms were used during anal or vaginal sex.”

While the authors note that the effectiveness of condoms at reducing the risk of HSV-2 may not be as great as the protection offered against other STIs and HIV, a lower risk of 30% is significant enough to warrant condom use to reduce the risk of acquiring HSV-2.