



# Evaluate Barriers to Condom Access in Pharmacies and Grocery Stores throughout Colorado

**T**here is a growing trend in some pharmacies and grocery stores across the United States toward restricting access to male condoms, especially in low-income and minority neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> Putting male condoms in locked cases or behind counters where store assistance is needed can dissuade some individuals from purchasing them. Those practices contradict efforts to decrease rates not only of unintended pregnancy, but also of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Anecdotal reports of restricted access to male condoms in Colorado pharmacies and grocery stores have begun to surface. If true, this could have major public health implications for the state. As a result, Prevention First Colorado recommends carrying out a statewide evaluation of access to male condoms in pharmacies and grocery stores to prevent unnecessary restrictions to access.

## THE NEED TO EVALUATE BARRIERS TO CONDOM ACCESS

According to original research conducted by Prevention First Colorado, male condoms were identified as the number one choice for contraceptive use by women in the state.<sup>2</sup> National data shows that with typical use, condoms' success rate for preventing pregnancy over a one-year period is 82.6 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The popularity of male condoms can be attributed to the fact they are the most easily available form of contraception and that they are available without a prescription at most grocery stores and pharmacies in the state. Compared to other contraceptive methods that may have age-specific restrictions (i.e., emergency contraception is not available without a prescription to anyone under the age of 17 and Medicaid pays for female sterilization only for women aged 21 and older), there are no age parameters for the purchase of male condoms. As a result, sexually active individuals rely on them more than other forms of contraception. When access to contraceptives is restricted, pregnancy rates can rise.

Moreover, male-condom access can affect the spread of STIs. In 2007, the United States experienced the largest number of chlamydia cases reported to date, and women – particularly young and minority women – were most affected. Syphilis cases also increased in 2007.<sup>4</sup> However, national research shows that male condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of transmission of STIs such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV.<sup>5</sup> With typical use, male condoms provide an overall 87 percent reduction in the risk of HIV transmission, with best- and worst-case scenarios ranging from 60 percent to 96 percent.<sup>6</sup> Male condoms also may be effective in reducing transmission of the human papilloma virus (HPV), which can cause genital warts and cervical cancer.<sup>7</sup> Correct and consistent condom use is critical

to protect all citizens of Colorado and across the nation from STIs – making unrestricted access more important than ever.

Unsolicited comments submitted to community-based reproductive health advocacy organizations have revealed that some stores have begun to limit access to male condoms by removing them from store shelves and placing them either behind pharmacy counters or in other less-accessible locations. Because different stores can have different policies regarding the sale and display of male condoms, there may be little consistency on condom accessibility and availability throughout the state. If certain stores are limiting access, it is important to understand the reasons for restricted access as well as which communities are affected by any restrictions that are imposed.

Prevention First Colorado research has shown that restrictions on access to contraceptives already present barriers to preventing unintended pregnancy among certain populations in Colorado, including women living in small towns and rural communities and those on Medicaid.<sup>8</sup> Removing unnecessary challenges to access of male condoms in common distribution points like pharmacies and grocery stores can help to mitigate these barriers and increase overall sexual health.

## OTHER STATES AND NATIONWIDE

Like other frequently stolen items such as pain relievers, infant formula, and razor blades, male condoms raise loss-prevention challenges for retailers who use various strategies to reduce the amount of theft from their businesses. According to the Food Marketing Institute, whose 1,500 member companies operate 26,000 retail food stores and 14,000 pharmacies in the United States and worldwide, male condoms rank number 23 among the 50 most frequently shoplifted

products.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, some pharmacies and grocery stores have taken male condoms off the shelves and made them available only through restricted access. Restricted access can range from behind-the-counter sales to placing the product in locked cases that require store employees to open them. While some stores opt for loss-prevention strategies that restrict access to male condoms, other less-restrictive options have been developed by stores, states and even male condom manufacturers to successfully address the problem of condom theft without restricting access. For example, placing condoms near the front of the store where employees can monitor them is an easy solution. This allows customers to still have easy access, but puts male condoms in high-traffic areas where they are harder to steal.

CVS drugstores in Washington, D.C., as well as other retailers in Milwaukee, Detroit, Chicago, and New York City, have placed male condoms in alarmed security “click boxes” similar to those used by some Colorado retailers for razor blades. The product is displayed in a case in a store aisle that has shields that customers must lift to remove the product. An alarm will sound if the shield is held open for too long or is opened repeatedly. This method has drawbacks because the cases can lock out and frequently require the assistance of store employees. Those devices must be maintained to remain in good working condition, which may increase

### Multi-Unit Condom Package Vending Machines

A male condom vending machine company was founded in Canada when the owner realized that Canada had very few condom vending machines and the ones that did exist did not dispense major brand condoms or dispense more than one condom at a time. The QCVL Display Machine was designed to remediate these challenges to retail distribution of condoms. The most prominent aspects of these machines are:

- Standard retail packages of condoms are dispensed by the vending machines. The machines are designed for standard packages of DUREX® condoms.
- Major brand condoms are sold through the machines to increase customers’ perceptions of product quality and reliability. Other condom machines often dispense unrecognized or generic brands, which customers may consider unsafe and unreliable.
- Highly vandal-resistant display windows are made of ¼-inch-thick material. The display window feature is designed to increase sales. People like to see what they are buying, and often consider buying what they see.
- The machines have no doors that can be pried off; a 16-gauge steel panel covers the front of the machines in their entirety. A barrel lock is attached to a heavy bolt that bolts the front to the back plate. Once a machine is bolted securely to a wall and the front panel is locked to the back, the machine is virtually impossible to break into.<sup>10</sup>

direct and indirect costs to retailers. Yet even with technical drawbacks, male condoms kept in a click box are more accessible than condoms that are locked behind a pharmacy counter that may have limited hours, or condoms that are placed in a locked case that requires assistance from store employees.

Trojan®, which accounts for more than 70 percent of the male condom market, is currently working to reduce the susceptibility of its products to theft by making its packaging tamper-proof.<sup>11</sup> In the typical shoplifting scenario, boxes are opened and discarded in the store. New Trojan® packaging, which was introduced in the second quarter of 2008, is more difficult to open. The perforation on the top of the box has been removed and replaced with a solid fold and the flaps on the side of the box are smaller. Both of those modifications make the packages more difficult to open. Trojan® believes that by making the packaging more tamper-resistant, shoplifting will decrease. Through its parent company Church & Dwight Co. Inc., Trojan® also works with retailers on a case-by-case basis to promote unrestricted access to condoms while addressing retailers’ loss-prevention concerns.<sup>12</sup>

One method stores may consider pursuing to mitigate theft of male condoms would be sales through vending machines that display any male condom products typically displayed on store shelves and dispense them only when payment has been received. (See sidebar on page 36, “Multi-Unit Condom Package Vending Machines.”) Unlike single- or limited-packet distribution machines found in some restaurants and bars, these machines would dispense larger-volume boxes of male condoms. This method would present a completely autonomous transaction that requires no employee-customer interaction, thereby eliminating embarrassment or discomfort on the part of the customer. Such vending machines have the potential to provide profits for stores while simultaneously encouraging people to buy and use male condoms.

As vendors move condoms off the shelves to address loss-prevention concerns, communities are increasingly carrying out surveys to evaluate the accessibility of male condoms and to ameliorate unnecessary, and in some instances, discriminatory, barriers to access. For example, when reports surfaced in a Phoenix-area newspaper that certain retail stores were limiting access to male condoms, the Arizona Department of Health Services conducted a study to determine the scope of the problem.<sup>13</sup> More than 400 establishments were surveyed to determine whether male condoms were easily accessible. The survey found that while there were regional or neighborhood differences in availability, for the most part male condoms were readily available throughout Phoenix.<sup>14</sup>

### CURRENTLY IN COLORADO

When male condoms are moved behind the counters or locked in cases, as they have been in at least two grocery

stores in the Denver metropolitan area, the public health risk that people will engage in unprotected sex increases. Currently in Colorado, there has been no statewide assessment of challenges to accessibility of male condoms in common distribution sites. However, anecdotal reports of male condoms being removed from store shelves demonstrate a need to carry out such an assessment of pharmacies' and retail stores' policies regarding sales and displays of male condoms and the impact of policies on condom accessibility.

Such a statewide assessment should evaluate how male condoms are made available at common distribution sites like pharmacies and retail locations, as well as whether condom displays are easily accessible at these distribution points. Ideally, the assessment would prioritize the accessibility of male condoms in communities where Prevention First Colorado research shows women who are most at-risk for unintended pregnancy are located, as well as in communities with higher-than-average rates of STIs and/or unintended pregnancies. Prevention First Colorado research, for example, found that women living in rural and small-town communities, as well as those on Medicaid, experience the most barriers to contraceptive use. It is vital, then, that these populations have unrestricted access to male condoms because this method might be the only contraceptive method considered by these populations.

A Colorado study would be able to provide data that is currently not available and suggest opportunities to improve access, if necessary. Decisions regarding the display and placement of condoms on store shelves should be made in a coordinated manner, rather than on an ad-hoc basis. This data also would provide a basis to facilitate exchange of best practices for loss-prevention strategies specific to male condoms among Colorado retailers.

## **BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION**

For a comprehensive statewide evaluation to be successfully implemented, a lead organization, either public or private, must take responsibility for the execution of the assessment process. Currently there is no clear indication of what type of Colorado organization, public or private, would be best suited to conduct the evaluation.

If a public agency like the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment were to carry out the assessment, the result would be an independent, unbiased report and the data would be publicly available. However, limited resources present a significant barrier to a publicly funded assessment. The current economic environment is not one in which new projects, especially projects that are not considered essential to the life or health of Coloradans, will be funded by the state Legislature.

If a private entity were to undertake the assessment, the project would be privately funded and restricted only by limitations in securing sufficient resources. However, many franchise pharmacies and retail outlets have policies that

preclude participation in private surveys; significant lack of participation by those locations would skew the data and result in an inaccurate assessment of accessibility.

Regardless of whether public or private organizations lead efforts to conduct such an assessment, collaboration with agencies that represent chain pharmacies and grocery stores in Colorado, as well as retailers and other organizations that are common sources for distribution of male condoms, is essential to gathering comprehensive data and generating workable solutions.

## **FIRST STEPS**

The public health concerns raised by restricted access to male condoms distinguish these products from others frequently subjected to restricted-access policies retailers implement to mitigate loss-prevention concerns. To evaluate the extent to which access to male condoms is restricted in Colorado, a number of steps should be considered.

1. Identify a single agency or a coalition of interested parties to be responsible for carrying out a statewide assessment of retailers' policies regarding male condom sales and distribution.
2. Include pharmacies, grocery stores, and other common retail locations where male condoms are purchased in the assessment.
3. Use the assessment findings to determine the extent to which populations that are at-risk for experiencing unintended pregnancy face increased barriers to accessibility of male condoms, and, based on those evaluations, develop alternative strategies that balance retailers' loss-prevention concerns with consumers' need to access these critical products.

Because male condoms are both the most-frequently used contraceptive method and the method that reduces the spread of STIs, it is critical that retailers' loss-prevention concerns are balanced against the public health need to promote unrestricted access to this critical product. As such, it is important to develop a baseline understanding in trends toward restrictions in access and the communities being affected by decisions to remove condoms from store shelves. Until there is a comprehensive understanding of the scope of restrictions to access, an informed policy to ensure access cannot be developed.

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