The sociocultural context of condom use within marriage in rural Lebanon.

Prevalence rates for condom use are low across the Middle East despite limited alternate contraceptive options and growing awareness of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. Virtually no research exists to explain this situation and to guide policy development or effective interventions. An analysis of 25 focus-group discussions with married women and men, interviews with service providers, and a survey of 589 women of childbearing age in a rural district of southern Lebanon reveal that a broad and complex set of sociocultural factors influence condom use. In the study area, 7 percent of married women currently use condoms, 24 percent reported ever use, and inconsistent use is common. Condoms are preferred primarily for their lack of physiological side effects. Five factors were found to impede method adoption and sustained use. These include various encumbering beliefs, reduced sexual pleasure, adverse experiences, gender-related fears and tensions, and a residual social stigma attached to condoms. Several strategies are suggested to increase and improve condom use. These issues will assume greater importance as fertility declines further in the region, demand for contraception continues to increase, and STDs and HIV/AIDS become more deeply rooted, as has occurred in other parts of the world.