

Birth Control: Choosing a Method That's Right for You

What kind of birth control is right for me?

Talk with your family doctor about the pros and cons of each birth control option. The type of birth control you choose depends on your needs. Some people only need to prevent pregnancy. Other people may also want to protect themselves or their partners from diseases that can be passed by having sex. Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) include acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), chlamydia, herpes, genital warts, gonorrhea and syphilis.

Is saying "no" really an option?

Yes. The risk of getting pregnant or catching an STD may outweigh the pleasure you get from sex. The only way to make sure you don't get pregnant, get someone pregnant or get an STD is not to have sex at all.

What are barrier methods?

Barrier methods include the diaphragm, the cervical cap and condoms. These methods prevent pregnancy by blocking sperm from getting into the uterus. Barrier methods must be used every time you have sex.

A woman must visit her doctor to be fitted for a diaphragm or a cervical cap.

Using a diaphragm may increase the risk of urinary tract infections in some women.

Are condoms a good choice?

Yes. Condoms aren't expensive, and they are widely available. Condoms are an especially good choice if you or your partner are also having sex with other people or if either of you has had sex with other people in the past.

Condoms offer the most protection against STDs. Using a spermicide with condoms can offer better protection against pregnancy, but it does not increase your protection against STDs. Spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 can cause genital irritation and increase your risk of catching an STD.

Female condoms aren't as effective as male condoms, but they may be a good choice if a man won't use a male condom.

What about the pill?

Birth control pills work mostly by preventing ovulation (the release of an egg by the ovaries). Most pills are made of two hormones called estrogen and progesterin. For the pill to work, you have to take it every day.

Some common side effects of birth control pills are nausea, headaches, breast swelling, water retention, weight gain and depression. The pill may reduce cramping and shorten the number of days of bleeding during the menstrual period. The pill may also help premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Women who take the pill should not smoke.

What about the patch?

The hormonal birth control patch (brand name: Ortho Evra) uses estrogen and progesterin to prevent pregnancy. It is applied to 1 of 4 places -- the buttocks, abdomen, upper torso or outer arm. The patch is used on a 4-week cycle. You put on a new patch once a week for 3 weeks. During the 4th week, you don't use a patch, and your period will start.

The patch's side effects are similar to those of the pill. Women who use the patch should not smoke.

What is the vaginal contraceptive ring?

The vaginal contraceptive ring (brand name: NuvaRing) is a thin, flexible ring that is inserted into the vagina. It releases hormones that keep you from getting pregnant. These hormones are the same ones used in most birth control pills. The ring is left in the vagina for 3 weeks. It doesn't have to be in a specific position in the vagina. After 3 weeks, you remove the ring, and your period will start. After 7 days, you insert a new ring.

If the ring is out of your vagina for more than 3 hours, it may not work effectively when you put it back in. To protect against pregnancy, you will need to use another form of birth control until the ring has been in all the time for 7 days in a row.

Women who use the vaginal ring should not smoke.

What about hormone shots and implants?

Hormone shots (brand names: Depo-Provera, Lunelle) work much like the pill to prevent pregnancy. They may have some side effects, such as headaches and changes in your period, mood and weight. A Depo-Provera shot prevents pregnancy for 3 months. A Lunelle shot prevents pregnancy for 1 month.

Hormone implants (brand name: Norplant System) are no longer available. If you are currently using hormone implants, you should talk to your doctor to see what your birth control options will be when your hormone implants expire. The implants prevent pregnancy for 5 years, but you can have them removed at any time.

What about an IUD?

"IUD" stands for "intrauterine device." An IUD is put in a woman's uterus by her doctor. It's made of flexible plastic. It isn't known exactly how IUDs prevent pregnancy. They seem to stop sperm from reaching the egg or prevent the egg from attaching to the uterus.

Some IUDs used in the past were related to serious health problems. Today IUDs are safer, but they still have some risks. Most doctors prefer to use IUDs only in women who have already had a baby. Side effects of IUDs include heavier bleeding and stronger cramps during periods.

What about being sterilized?

Sterilization is when a man or woman has an operation to permanently prevent pregnancy. If you're sure that you don't want to have children or you don't want more children, sterilization may be the right choice for you.

Tubal ligation (also called "getting your tubes tied") involves closing off a woman's fallopian tubes so eggs can't travel through them to reach the uterus. A device called Essure can also be used to close off a woman's fallopian tubes. Essure is a metal coil that is inserted into your fallopian tubes by your doctor.

Men are sterilized with a vasectomy. The man's vas deferens (sperm ducts) are closed off so sperm can't get through.

What is natural family planning?

Natural family planning requires a couple to learn when in the woman's cycle she can get pregnant (usually 4 days before and 2 days after ovulation). They must use a barrier method of birth control or not have intercourse during those days. There are a number of ways to keep track of a woman's ovulation. All of them require a lot of planning and commitment.

Is withdrawal effective?

No. When a man tries to pull out before ejaculating ("coming"), he usually leaves behind a small amount of fluid that leaks from the penis during sex. This fluid has enough sperm in it to cause pregnancy.

How well does birth control work?

The box below shows the failure rates (number of pregnancies per 100 women per year) for different types of birth control. These numbers are for couples who use the methods the right way every time they have sex. The failure rates are higher if you don't use birth control the right way every time.

Failure rates for birth control methods when used correctly (Number of pregnancies per 100 women per year)

Male condom alone	11
Female condom alone	21
Diaphragm with spermicide	17
Cervical cap with spermicide	17 to 23
Sponge with spermicide	14 to 28
Spermicide alone	20 to 50
Oral contraceptives	1 to 2
Contraceptive patch*	1 to 2
Vaginal contraceptive ring	1 to 2
Hormone shots	less than 1
Hormone implant	less than 1
IUD	less than 1
Periodic abstinence	20
Surgical sterilization (female)	less than 1
Surgical sterilization (male)	less than 1

* *Contraceptive patch is less effective in women weighing more than 198 pounds.*

Information from U.S. Food and Drug Administration. *Birth Control Guide*.
Retrieved August 4, 2004, from the World Wide Web:
<http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/1997/babytabl.html>

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