



Fact Sheet

Women's Birth Control Choices

Female contraceptive methods compared

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Choices in birth control for women today

Birth control is an important issue for most women. Being able to control reproductive functioning is a necessary component of career preparation and family growth management. Many methods of contraception are available today. No one contraceptive method is perfect; there are pros and cons of every method. The best method is one that a woman and her partner feel comfortable using and one that they will use correctly and consistently. The risk for sexually transmitted diseases must also be assessed with contraceptive decision making. There are several contraception methods for birth control, including combined oral contraceptives (the pill), diaphragms, cervical caps, natural family planning (NFP), intrauterine devices (IUDs), injections, emergency contraceptive pills (the "morning-after pill"), contraceptive foam, the "mini-pill" and tubal sterilisation. For many women a combination of methods is optimum taking into account the protection she feels she needs.

The diaphragm

The diaphragm is a latex or silicone disc that is placed inside the vagina so that it covers the cervix (the entrance to the uterus). Diaphragms block semen from entering the cervix. A spermicide (natural or chemical) is placed onto the diaphragm which kills sperm and physically blocks the cervix.

Natural substances used for contraception (such as lactic-acid based gels, aloe vera and lemon juice, or honey) immobilise sperm but do not necessarily kill it. While the term "natural spermicides" is not technically correct, it is still used for ease of reference and because the contraceptive effect is identical to chemical spermicides.

The advantages to using a diaphragm include the following:

- It is effective (similar to the mini pill or condoms) and gives you complete control.
- When used correctly and consistently, the risk of becoming pregnant is less 2 percent for experienced users
- It can be put in several hours before initiation of sexual activity
- It contains no hormones, and there are no hormonal side effects
- It offers some protection against sexually transmitted infections

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The disadvantages include the following:

- You must be fitted for the diaphragm by a healthcare professional.
- You must use spermicide (chemical or natural)
- Insertion may interrupt sex.
- You have to remember to take it with you on vacations and trips.
- It takes practice for some women to insert a diaphragm correctly.

The cervical cap

The cervical cap is a dome-shaped device that fits snugly over the cervix. Cervical caps come in a number of different types. There are three latex re-usable types (Prentif, Vimule and Dumas), one silicone reusable type (Femcap) and one silicone single use disposable type (Oves). The groove on the inside of the cap creates a seal and keeps the cap in place together with support of the vaginal wall. Like the diaphragm, the cap is a barrier which blocks passage of sperm from the vagina through the cervix into the uterus and tubes where they can fertilize the ripened egg.

Cervical caps are used with a small amount of natural or chemical spermicide. The natural spermicides are lactic acid based, aloe and lemon juice or honey. A Pap smear is required within six months prior to fitting a cervical cap.

What are the advantages of the cap?

- Can be worn for up to 3 days (5 days if used with honey) allowing spontaneous protected sex (continuous regimes are also available)
- Is smaller and uses less spermicide than the diaphragm
- Can often be worn when a diaphragm doesn't fit well.
- Good alternative for women who cannot use the diaphragm due to poor vaginal muscle tone or chronic bladder infections.
- It contains no hormones, and there are no hormonal side effects
- It can be used with natural spermicides if the user is naturally oriented
- Provides some protection against sexually transmitted infections

What are the disadvantages of the cap?

- You must be fitted for a cap by a healthcare professional.
- You must use spermicide (chemical or natural)
- Sometimes more difficult to insert than a diaphragm.
- An odor can occur if worn for over three days without cleaning

The female condom

The female condom is a lubricated polyurethane sheath shaped somewhat like the male condom. The closed end has a flexible ring (like the rim of a small diaphragm) that you insert into the vagina with the open end left on the outside. The female condom prevents semen from getting into the vagina and infections being passed to the outer vaginal area.

What are the advantages of the female condom?

- Can be inserted at anytime ahead of intercourse
- Very high level of protection against STD's
- Completely under the female's control
- It contains no hormones, and there are no hormonal side effects

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What are the disadvantages of the female condom?

- Takes a little practice to insert
- Some women find it a little cumbersome at first
- Larger than a male condom.

Natural family planning (NFP)

Natural family planning or NFP is based on identifying your fertile window and either avoiding intercourse during this window (about 7-10 days) or using a diaphragm, cap or condom during this fertile window. Identifying your fertile window is achieved by keeping a chart of waking body temperature (BBT) and cervical mucus observation (CM).

Their advantages include the following:

- Totally natural method, no chemicals or side effects
- You get in tune with your bodies natural cycle
- You can use NFP to avoid or plan a pregnancy
- It's as effective as the pill if taught well

The disadvantages include the following:

- It takes three to six cycles to learn effectively
- You have to keep a daily record.
- Women with very irregular cycles may have very long phases that have to be regarded as fertile
- No protection against STD's.

Birth control pills

Birth control pills, also called combined oral contraceptives, are pills that contain two synthetic hormones, an oestrogen and a progestin. They prevent pregnancy by stopping ovulation and by making the lining of the uterus thinner.

Their advantages include the following:

- They decrease risk of cancer of the ovary and cancer of the lining of the uterus.
- They may decrease menstrual cramping and pain.
- They can reduce menstrual flow and the risk of anemia.
- You have less concern with getting pregnant.

The disadvantages include the following:

- There are long term health effects
- You must remember to take them daily.
- You may have nausea or spotting (or both) during the first month.
- Side effects can include headaches, depression or decreased libido.
- They provide no protection against sexually transmitted infections.

The intrauterine device

The IUD is inserted into the uterus and prevents implantation of a fertilized egg. Once inserted, the IUD can be used for up to 10 years as an effective contraceptive.

The advantages of using an IUD include the following:

- You will not experience any hormonal side effects.
- Once it is in place, you can forget about it.
- There is no further cost after the initial purchase and insertion.

The disadvantages include the following:

- It is often painful to insert and causes uterine bleeding
- You may have post fitting cramping or pain.
- You may experience irregular, heavy periods or more cramping with periods.
- It offers no protection against sexually transmitted infections.
- It is available only with a prescription and must be inserted by a healthcare provider.

Birth control injections

Injections are commonly called "depo" They contain a synthetic hormone much like the progesterone a woman produces during the last two weeks of each monthly cycle. The hormone stops the release of an egg and provides other contraceptive effects.

The advantages of the birth control shot include the following:

- Nothing must be taken daily or used at the time of sexual intercourse.
- They are extremely effective.
- The monthly menstrual flow is lessened, as is cramping.
- It provides complete privacy, in that nobody has to know you're using birth control.

The disadvantages include the following:

- These shots often lead to irregular periods.
- Most women gain weight and experience low libido
- The shots offer no protection against sexually transmitted infections.
- You have to return to your healthcare provider every three months for an injection.

Birth control implants

Implants are commonly called "Implanon or Nexplanon" They contain a synthetic hormone (etonogestrel) much like the progesterone a woman produces during the last two weeks of each monthly cycle. The hormone stops the release of an egg and provides other contraceptive effects. Implants are effective for 3 years. The implant is inserted surgically under the skin in the upper inner arm.

The advantages of the birth control implant include the following:

- Long-term method of birth control (protects against pregnancy from 24 hours after insertion, for up to 3 years after insertion)
- Can remove whenever you want to or can wait for 3 years to remove
- Very effective against pregnancy
- May cause light or no menstrual periods

The disadvantages include the following:

- No protection against sexually transmitted diseases
- Requires minor surgery and insertion of the tiny rod underneath the skin
- Requires minor surgery to remove spent capsule
- Can cause side effects such as irregular menstrual periods, depression, nervousness, hair loss, and weight gain
- Could have infection at area where capsules implanted
- Can't be used by women with certain medical conditions and by women who use certain medications

Contraceptive foam

Foam is a vaginal spermicide that is placed into the vagina using an applicator. It kills and destroys sperm, and it prevents sperm from reaching the egg by blocking the opening to the cervical canal.

The advantages of using foam include the following:

- It is available at chemists without a prescription.
- It is safe, and there are no hormones involved.
- It adds lubrication and moisture.

The disadvantages include the following:

- Effective protection from pregnancy is low
- It can be irritating to the vagina for some women.
- It provides no protection against sexually transmitted infection.
- Some people feel that it is messy.
- Because it is difficult to judge the amount of foam left in the container, you should always keep an extra handy.

The "mini-pill"

The "mini-pill" is a progestin-only pill. Mini-pills work by thickening the cervical mucus so sperm cannot reach the egg and by making the lining of the uterus thinner. They can sometimes stop ovulation.

The advantages include the following:

- There are no oestrogen side effects.
- They can be taken by women who have had side effects from oestrogen pills.
- The amount of progestin in the mini-pill is less than in the combined pill.

- Nursing mothers can take them.

The disadvantages include the following:

- They may cause menstrual irregularity.
- You may have shorter periods and scant flow.
- You have to take a pill daily.
- They offer no protection against sexually transmitted infections.
- They require a prescription.

Female sterilisation

Tubal sterilisation is an operation that blocks the woman's fallopian tubes, preventing sperm and eggs from meeting. It is the most common form of birth control worldwide.

The advantages include the following:

- It is an extremely effective method of birth control
- The operation is fairly simple and safe
- Nothing needs to be taken daily or used at the time of sexual intercourse.
- It does not affect your sex drive or ability to enjoy sex

The disadvantages include the following:

- It requires general anaesthetic and discomfort for several weeks after the operation
- It is usually impossible to reverse this operation
- It offers no protection against sexually transmitted infections

If you want your partner to be responsible for birth control he can use condoms, or he can have a vasectomy.

Male condoms

Male condoms are commonly used for birth control and are made of latex, plastic or natural membranes. They work by preventing body fluids from mixing during intercourse. If used consistently and correctly, they prevent pregnancy about 97 percent of the time.

The advantages of using of condoms include the following:

- They are safe and effective at preventing both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- They come in a variety of colours, sizes and styles and can make sex more interesting.
- They are not messy.
- They can be used at the last minute for unplanned intercourse

The disadvantages include the following:

- Sex must be interrupted while the condom is put on.
- Care must be taken to avoid tearing the condom.

- You cannot use oil-based lubricants such as Vaseline or whipped cream.
- Some people are sensitive or allergic to latex or find the smell unpleasant

Vasectomy

A vasectomy is an operation that blocks the tubes that carry sperm to the penis.

The advantages include the following:

- It is a minor operation and is considered to be safe and effective.
- It is an excellent form of contraception for men in stable relationships who do not want any more children.
- It is less expensive and involves fewer complications than tubal ligation.

The disadvantages include the following:

- Surgery is required, and many men fear having an operation on their testicles.
- Some men fear this surgery will have an effect on their erection.
- The operation is almost always permanent.
- This type of birth control offers no protection against sexually transmitted infections.

Emergency contraception

For 72 hours after unprotected sex, you can take emergency contraceptive pills to avoid becoming pregnant or for up to seven days after unprotected sex, you can have a copper IUD fitted which can be left in place to provide long term contraception or removed in your next menstrual cycle.

Emergency contraceptive pill

Emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) are equivalent to two large doses of ordinary birth control pills. To avoid pregnancy you must take the ECPs within 72 hours after unprotected intercourse.

The advantages of the ECPs include the following:

- They prevent unwanted pregnancies after unprotected sex.
- Women who can't take regular birth control pills can still use the ECPs.
- They prevent abortions and cost less than an abortion.

The disadvantages include the following:

- They cause nausea in about 50 percent of women.
- They are not as effective as other types of contraceptives.
- They offer no protection against sexually transmitted infections.

When to see a healthcare provider

In general, your contraceptive healthcare provider should be consulted any time that there is pain during intercourse or any unusual bleeding, spotting, discharge, or odour. Any burning or itching associated with spermicide use may be an indication of an allergy to the agent. A healthcare provider should be consulted in the event of toxic shock syndrome symptoms. With a diaphragm or cap, it is wise to be checked any time that the diaphragm or cap does not seem to be fitting properly or there is discomfort, pain, or recurring bladder infections or after gaining or losing 7 lbs in weight. After having a baby, it is usually necessary to be refitted for a different sized diaphragm or cap because vaginal depth, cervical size/shape and muscle tone are usually altered by full-term pregnancy.

Our Female Healthcare Philosophy

At the Women's Natural Health Practice we specialise in providing comprehensive natural reproductive, gynaecological and general healthcare for females from adolescence to post-menopause. Our approach is to integrate techniques in both oriental and western medical diagnosis in order to formulate a naturally oriented treatment plan combining acupuncture, herbal medicine, nutritional therapy, exercise and lifestyle. Each treatment plan is tailored specifically to each individual woman maximising results.

Please email us at enquiries@naturalgynae.com with questions, we are more than happy to provide any information via email that will assist you in deciding which treatment approach would be best for you