

Health Information Sheet

Choosing a Method of Birth Control

The type of birth control you should use 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. These sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) include AIDS, herpes, genital warts, syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia. You can talk with your family doctor about what birth control method is right for you.

How do spermicides work?

Spermicides help prevent pregnancy by killing sperm. They also help protect against some STDs. Spermicides come as foams, jellies or creams that are put into the vagina. They work best when used with another form of birth control, such as condoms, diaphragms or cervical caps.

Are condoms a good choice?

Yes. Condoms help prevent pregnancy and can also help prevent STDs. Condoms are good to use if you or your partner are having sex with other people or if either of you has had sex with other people in the past. The more partners either one of you has had, the more risk that one of you may have an STD.

Be sure to use condoms made of latex (rubber). The AIDS virus can get through condoms made of animal membranes. Carefully follow directions when you use a condom. Condoms work best if you use spermicides along with them. The spermicides should be placed in the vagina (not just on the condom). Use only water-based lubricants like K-Y Jelly. Body lotions or Vaseline petroleum jelly can cause the rubber to break.

What about the sponge, cervical cap and diaphragm?

These methods help prevent pregnancy by covering the cervix (the opening of the uterus) to block sperm from getting into the uterus. They also help protect against some STDs.

The sponge can be bought at the drug store without a prescription. It comes soaked in spermicide. It helps prevent pregnancy for 24 hours. You don't need to put in a new sponge during this time, even if you have sex more than once. The sponge must be left in place at least six hours after the last time you have sex.

The cervical cap and the diaphragm require a visit to your doctor to be fitted. They're used along with spermicides. Both the cap and the diaphragm must be left in your vagina for at least six hours after you have sex. The cervical cap can be left in place for up to 72 hours (three days), and you don't have to add fresh spermicide every time you have sex. The diaphragm shouldn't be left in place longer than 24 hours (one day), and you should add fresh spermicide every time you have sex. The diaphragm may increase your risk of urinary tract infections.

How about the IUD?

IUDs are usually made of flexible plastic. They are put into your uterus by your doctor. 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. Some health risks are still connected with the IUD. You can discuss these with your doctor.

What about being sterilized?

Sterilization is an operation on a man or a woman that prevents pregnancy. If you're sure that you don't want to have children or don't want more children, sterilization is a good choice. Women are sterilized with an operation called tubal ligation (getting your "tubes tied"). Men are sterilized with an operation called vasectomy.

How do hormones work?

Hormones work mostly by preventing ovulation (the release of an egg by the ovaries). Methods that use hormones include the pill, hormone implants (Norplant) and hormone injections (Depo-Provera).

The implants are capsules that are placed in the upper arm. They help prevent pregnancy for five years before they must be replaced. But you can have them removed if you decide to get pregnant. Hormone injections must be repeated every three months.

You must be able to remember to take the pill every day. A benefit of the implants and the injections is that you don't have to think about using birth control every day.

Hormones can have side effects and are connected with certain health risks. But they can also be very effective and have some health benefits. Talk about all of these things with your doctor to decide if you want to try hormones.

What is the rhythm method?

The rhythm method requires that you learn when in your cycle you are fertile and that you don't have sex during those days. This method takes planning and attention every month. Your doctor can explain how to use the rhythm method.

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 a pregnancy.

This information provides a general overview on birth control methods and may not apply to everyone.