

CONTRACEPTION CHOICES

The word contraception means the prevention of conception by the use of birth control devices or methods. Conception is the act of getting pregnant - when a woman's egg is fertilised by a man's sperm.

There are many different methods of contraception available to women (and men). Different methods suit different people at different times in their lives. The most effective contraceptives are ones that are 'long-acting' and do not rely on a pill being taken every day or a condom being used every time you have sex. The long acting contraceptives are the Injection (Depo Provera), the Contraceptive Implant and the Intrauterine Devices (the copper coil or IUD or the hormone coil known as Mirena or IUS).

You can get free contraception and advice from most GPs or from a specialist Contraception & Sexual Health service.

But remember, whilst most types of contraception are effective at preventing pregnancy they will not protect against Sexually Transmitted infections (STIs). It may, in addition, be advisable to use condoms or femidoms (female condoms) as well.

If untreated, some STIs like chlamydia or gonorrhoea can cause long-term damage to our bodies and can make it difficult for women to get pregnant in the future.

Implants and Injections

Implants and injections are some of the most effective yet reversible methods of contraception.

The contraception **implant** is a small flexible rod that contains hormones that are slowly released into the body. The implant is inserted by a doctor or nurse, under local anaesthetic, into the upper arm and it works for **3 years**. The implant works by:

- Stopping eggs being released
- Thickening the cervical mucus to prevent the sperm meeting an egg
- Thinning the lining of the womb to stop eggs implanting

Implants are over 99% effective and are immediately reversible when removed by a doctor or nurse.

The contraceptive **injection** (Depo Provera) is an injection of hormones given every **12 weeks**. The injection is given into a muscle (usually in your bottom) and slowly releases the hormone into your body. The injection works in a similar way to the implant by:

- Stopping eggs being released
- Thickening the cervical mucus to prevent the sperm meeting an egg
- Thinning the lining of the womb to stop eggs implanting

It may take a woman some time to regain fertility after she stops using this method of contraception.

Contraceptive injections are over 99% effective as long as the injections are kept up-to-date.

Intrauterine Contraceptive Devices

Intrauterine Contraceptive Devices are some of the most effective yet reversible methods of contraception.

Intrauterine Device (IUD or Copper Coil)

An IUD is a small plastic and copper device that is fitted into the womb by a doctor or nurse. It works by stopping the sperm fertilising the egg.

This device can stay in place **between 5 and 10 years** depending on the type, but can be taken out by a doctor or nurse at any time and is immediately reversible.

The IUD is over 99% effective and provides long lasting contraception.

Intrauterine System (IUS or Mirena)

An IUS is a similar device, but contains a slow release hormone that:

- Thickens the cervical mucus to prevent sperm meeting an egg
- Thins the lining of the womb to stop eggs implanting

An IUS works for 5 years, but can be removed by a doctor or nurse at any time and is immediately reversible.

The IUS is over 99% effective and is suitable for women with heavy periods

Pills, Patches and Rings

Pills, patches and rings are over 99% effective but only if they are used correctly. Because it can be very easy to forget to take pills (or change patches/rings) the failure rates can be much higher than this.

Contraceptive pills contain hormones that help to prevent pregnancy by:

- Stopping eggs being released
- Thickening the cervical mucus to prevent the sperm meeting an egg
- Thinning the lining of the womb to stop eggs implanting

There are two different types of pill available:

1. The Combined Oral Contraception Pill (COC) – which is taken for 3 weeks out of 4.

2. The Progestogen Only Pill (POP or mini-pill)

- which is taken at the same time every day.

The doctor or nurse will advise you about which pill is suitable for you and they will teach you how to take it correctly.

It is very important to remember to take your pill at the correct time every day. If you are forgetful this may not be the best method for you – you might be better trying one of the long acting reversible methods such as the implant, the injection or the IUD.

Contraceptive patches look similar to nicotine patches and gradually release hormones that work in the same way as those contained in contraceptive pills.

A new patch is used each week for 3 weeks out of every four. It is important to change the patch at the correct time.

The **Contraceptive Ring** (Nuvaring) is a new device which contains hormones and works in a similar way to the combined pill. The ring is worn inside the vagina for 3 weeks out of every 4.

Condoms

Male Condoms

Condoms are available in lots of different shapes and types. Most condoms are made of latex, though non-latex varieties are also available if you are allergic to latex. Condoms cover the penis during sex and prevent sperm from entering a woman's vagina. If used correctly, condoms are 98% effective in preventing pregnancy and can also prevent many STIs from being passed on including chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis and HIV.

Female Condoms (Femidoms)

Like the male condom, the female condom (femidom) acts as a barrier to prevent sperm from entering the vagina. The female condom has an internal ring that is placed inside the vagina; the condom lines the vagina and the opening lies just outside.

If used correctly, the femidom is 95% effective and can also be an effective barrier to STIs.

Permanent Methods Of Contraception

These methods of contraception would usually only be chosen once you have children and have decided that your family is complete.

Female Sterilisation

This is a permanent and irreversible method of contraception. It involves a surgical operation under general anaesthetic to place clips on the fallopian tubes. This prevents eggs from getting into the womb.

Male Vasectomy

This is a surgical operation performed under local anaesthetic. The 'Vas Deferens' (the tubes that carry sperm) are cut and sealed and this stops sperm being released when a man ejaculates. It should be considered as a permanent solution to contraception, but can be reversed in some cases.

After the operation, it can take up to six months for the remaining sperm in the tubes to be cleared. Until a man has had a clear sperm test another method of contraception should be used.

Less Effective Methods Of Contraception

Diaphragms & Caps

These come in a variety of different shapes and sizes and are basically a latex or rubber device that holds spermicidal jelly or cream over the cervix (opening of the womb), inside the vagina. They can be put in place any time before sex but need to be left in place for at least 6 hours after sex before removing.

Diaphragms and caps have a higher failure rate (92-96% effective) than the more effective long-acting methods.

Natural Family Planning

This method of contraception involves plotting the times of the month when a woman is fertile (producing an egg) and likely to get pregnant.

Natural family planning means recording fertility signals such as body temperature and cervical secretions to identify when it is safer for a woman to have sex and not get pregnant.

Unfortunately this method involves not having penetrative sex during a women's most fertile period (8-9 days each month) and therefore is not a very popular or reliable method of contraception.

Emergency Contraception

If contraception has not been used during sex (or contraception has failed e.g. a condom has split), there are two options available to help prevent an unplanned pregnancy.

1. Emergency Pill

There are now 2 types of emergency pill which can prevent or delay an egg being released. One of them must be taken within 3 days (72 hours) of unprotected sex, the other is effective up to 5 days (120 hours) after unprotected sex. It is best to take the emergency pill as soon as possible. It is still advisable for a woman to take a pregnancy test 2 weeks later to make sure that the pill has worked.

2. Emergency IUD

If an IUD is fitted within 5 days of unprotected sex, it can stop a fertilised egg from implanting in the womb. After fitting, the IUD can be kept in place as a long-term method of contraception or can be removed as soon as a woman is sure she is not pregnant.

Making Sex Safer

As well as thinking about which contraceptive method is best suited to you and your lifestyle, you need to think about protecting yourself and your partner/s from Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

STIs can be passed on through vaginal sex, anal sex, oral sex, mutual masturbation/ fingering or by sharing sex toys with someone who has an infection. So basically they can affect anyone who is sexually active – whether you're straight, lesbian, gay or bisexual.

At best, STIs can cause discomfort, embarrassment and irritation. They can, however, have longer-term effects on our health including infertility problems (unable to have children), life-long illnesses or in some cases, if left untreated, even lead to death. Some STIs, like chlamydia, can have no symptoms at all, so you may not know you have it and may be unaware that you are passing it on.

Only the male and female condoms provide an effective barrier to help prevent STIs as well as unplanned pregnancy.

If you have recently had unprotected sex (without a condom) with a new partner, it may be a good idea to have STI testing at your local sexual health clinic.

Remember, sex should be pleasurable and fun. Knowing that you are protected from becoming pregnant or picking up a Sexually Transmitted Infection can take away some of the worries about sex so that we can relax and enjoy it more!