Birth Control Methods

Only you can decide what is best for you. Choose a birth control method that fits your life. Note: When you first start using most of these methods, it takes up to a week to start working. Be sure to use backup birth control (like a condom) for the first seven days.

Long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) methods are the intrauterine device (IUD) and the implant. Both methods are excellent at preventing pregnancy, last for many years, and are easy to use. Both are reversible—if you want to become pregnant or if you want to stop using them, you can have them removed at any time. Over the long term, LARC methods are 20 times more effective than birth control pills, the patch, or the ring. One of the reasons LARC methods are so good at preventing pregnancy is because you don’t have to remember to do anything after you start using them.

- **IUD**: The intrauterine device (IUD) is shaped like a tiny “T” and made of soft but strong plastic. Getting the IUD is quick and simple. It can be done in an office or clinic. As the IUD goes in (it sits in your uterus), you may feel cramping or pinching. It won’t get in the way of going to the bathroom, having sex, or wearing a tampon. There are two types of IUDs: copper and hormonal. Both work very well. Less than 1/100 women get pregnant while using an IUD. An IUD does not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

- **Implant**: The implant is a type of hormonal birth control. It is a tiny plastic rod, about the size of a matchstick. A health care provider can place the implant under the skin of your upper arm. Less than 1/100 women with it will get pregnant each year. Once put in, it slowly lets out a hormone into your body and lasts up to 3 years. After that, the hormone runs out and it stops working. If you want to keep using this method, you have to get a new implant. Your provider can put in a new implant once the old one is removed. This takes about three minutes. If you want to stop using the implant, it is easy to remove. It is safe to use while breastfeeding. The implant does not protect against STIs.
Other birth control methods:

- **Abstinence**: Abstinence typically means not having vaginal sex. “Outercourse” is sex play that does not involve vaginal sex. If you only have outercourse, it is unlikely that you will get pregnant. But if, semen gets into your vagina (or if you have unplanned vaginal sex), it is possible to get pregnant.

- **Birth Control Pills**: Birth control pills are a pill you take each day to prevent pregnancy. They are sometimes called “the pill” or oral contraception. The pill works because of the hormones in it. They make the mucus in your cervix thicker. This keeps sperm from getting into your uterus (womb). They also stop your ovaries from letting go of eggs. The pill works very well—if taken at the same time each day. In a year less than 1/100 women get pregnant who use the pill the right way. That means they take it each day at the same time. In a year 8/100 women get pregnant who use it the wrong way. That means they may miss some days, or they may take it at other times. You should not use the pill if you smoke—especially if you are older than 35. Some drugs may make the pill less useful in preventing pregnancy. Talk with your health care provider about any medicines or herbs you take.

- **Vaginal Ring**: The vaginal ring is a small, flexible ring that you put into your vagina once a month to prevent pregnancy. The ring is easy to put in and one size fits most women. It has the same hormones that are in most birth control pills. If always used the right way, less than 1/100 women will get pregnant each year using it. If not always used the right way, 8/100 women will get pregnant each year. When you put the ring into your vagina, it stays there for three weeks straight. You take it out the fourth week and get your period. After the week off, put in a new ring and start the cycle again. The ring can sometimes fall out when taking out a tampon, going to the bathroom, or having sex. Most women wear the ring during sex with no problems and without their partners feeling it. If the ring falls out or you remove it, rinse it with warm water and put it back in within three hours. The vaginal ring does not protect against STIs. Some drugs may make it less useful in preventing pregnancy. Talk with your provider about any medicines or herbs you take.
• **Injection/Shot:** The birth control shot is an injection of a hormone called progestin. Each shot prevents pregnancy for about three months and works very well. If always used the right way, less than 1/100 women will get pregnant each year using it. If not always used the right way, 3/100 women will get pregnant each year with the shot. A health care provider will give you the shot in your arm every 12 weeks. The hormone in it keeps your ovaries from letting go of eggs and helps block sperm from getting into the uterus. The shot does not protect against STIs. Women can get pregnant after they stop using the shot, but it may take about a year.

• **Patch:** The patch is a sticky square that has hormones to prevent pregnancy. The patch is worn on the skin and changed once a week. If always used the right way, 1/100 women who use it will get pregnant each year. If not always used the right way, 8/100 women who use it will get pregnant each year. You can wear it while bathing, swimming, and exercising. Replace your patch on the same day each week for three weeks. The fourth week is “patch-free.” Your period will likely start during the “patch-free” week. The patch does not protect against STIs. Some drugs may interact and make it less useful in preventing pregnancy. Talk with your provider about any medicines or herbs you take.

• **Barrier Methods (Male and Female Condoms):** The condom is a thin latex tube that fits snugly over the penis during sex. When taking the erect penis out of the vagina or anus after sex, the condom should be held at the base of the penis to keep semen from leaking out of the condom. Throw away the condom (in the trash, never flush down the toilet) after one use. Don’t use condoms with spermicide, as they can raise the risk of STIs. The female condom is a thin plastic tube with a flexible ring at each end to help it stay in place in the vagina. The female condom can be put in up to 8 hours before sex. After sex, you should take it out right away and throw it out. Each female condom can only be used one time. Female condoms can also be used for anal sex. Don’t use female condoms and male condoms together because they can stick to each other and rip. If the condom rips or falls out of your vagina, you should take emergency birth control ASAP within five days. Anyone can buy condoms in a store without a prescription.
Emergency Contraception (EC)

Emergency contraception is birth control that prevents pregnancy after sex, which is why it is also called “the morning after pill” or “the day after pill.” You can use EC right away—or up to five days after sex—if you think your birth control failed, you didn’t use birth control, or you were forced to have sex.

EC makes it much less likely you will get pregnant. But it is not as good as birth control that’s used before or during sex. So if you are sexually active or planning to be, don’t use EC as your only guard against pregnancy. Also, EC does not protect against STIs.

There are two types of EC:

- **Pills:** You can get progestin-only EC without a prescription from most pharmacies, but call to make sure that it’s in stock. Look for Plan B One-Step, Take Action, Next Choice One-Dose, My Way, or other generics in the family planning aisle. Though the package directions say that it’s for use by women ages 17 and older, anyone can buy it without needing to show ID. Plan B One-Step often costs about $40-$50, and the generics cost about $35-$45. If you want to use insurance to buy EC, go to the pharmacy window and ask for help.

- **IUD:** The Copper-T is an IUD that some women use for regular birth control, but you can also have a provider put it in it up to five days after sex to prevent pregnancy. As EC, the Copper-T IUD works better than an EC pill because it cuts your risk of getting pregnant by more than 99%. One more plus for this IUD is that you can keep it in place to prevent pregnancy for up to ten years.

References:
- www.arhp.org/publications-and-resources/patient-resources/fact-sheets
- ec.princeton.edu/emergency-contraception.html