

Learning About Birth Control



What is birth control?

Birth control is any method used to prevent pregnancy. Another word for birth control is contraception.

If you have sex without birth control, there is a chance that you could get pregnant. This is true even if you have not started having periods yet or you are getting close to menopause.

The only sure way to prevent pregnancy is to not have sex. But finding a good method of birth control that you are comfortable with can help you avoid an unplanned pregnancy.

Be sure to tell your doctor about any health problems you have or medicines you take. He or she can help you choose the birth control method that is right for you.

What are the types of birth control?

There are many different kinds of birth control. Each has pros and cons. Learning about all the methods will help you find one that is right for you.

- **Long-acting reversible contraception (LARC)** is the most effective reversible method you can use to prevent pregnancy. If you decide you want to get pregnant, you can have them removed. LARCs are implants and intrauterine devices (IUDs). While they are being used, they usually prevent pregnancy for years.
 - Implants are placed under the skin of the arm. They release the hormone progestin and prevent pregnancy for about 3 years.
 - IUDs are placed in the uterus by a doctor. There are two main types of IUDs—the copper IUD and the hormonal IUD. The hormonal IUD releases progestin. IUDs prevent pregnancy for 3 to 10 years, depending on the type.
- **Hormonal methods** are very good at preventing pregnancy. Combination birth control pills ("the pill"), skin patches, and vaginal rings release the hormones estrogen and progestin. Shots, mini-pills, hormonal IUDs, and implants release progestin only.
- **Barrier methods** generally do not prevent pregnancy as well as IUDs or hormonal methods do. Barrier methods include condoms, diaphragms, cervical caps, and sponges. You must use barrier methods every time you have sex.
- **Natural family planning** can work if you and your partner are very careful and you have a regular ovulation cycle. You will need to keep good records so you know when you are most likely to become pregnant (you are fertile). And during times you are fertile, you will need to not have sex or to use a barrier method. Natural family planning is also known as fertility awareness and the rhythm method.
- **Permanent birth control (sterilization)** gives you lasting protection against pregnancy. A man can have a vasectomy, or a woman can have her tubes tied (tubal ligation). But this is only a good choice if you are sure that you don't want any (or any more) children.
- **Emergency contraception** is a backup method to prevent pregnancy if you didn't use birth control or a condom breaks. The most effective emergency contraception is prescribed by a doctor. This includes the copper IUD (inserted by a doctor) or a prescription pill. You can also get emergency contraceptive pills without a prescription at most drugstores.

How do you choose the best method?

The best method of birth control is one that protects you every time you have sex. This usually depends on how well you use it. To find a method that will work best for you, think about:

- **How well it works.** Think about how important it is to you to avoid pregnancy. Then look at how well each method works. For example, if you plan to have a child soon anyway, you may not need a very reliable method. If you don't want children but

feel it is wrong to end a pregnancy, choose a type of birth control that works very well.

- **How much effort it takes.** For example, birth control pills may not be a good choice if you often forget to take medicine. Or, if you are not sure you will stop and use a barrier method each time you have sex, pick another method.
- **How much the method costs.** For example, condoms are cheap or free in some clinics. Some insurance companies cover the cost of prescription birth control. But cost can sometimes be misleading. An IUD costs a lot up front. But it works for years, making it low-cost over time.
- **Whether it protects you from infection.** Latex condoms can help protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as herpes or HIV/AIDS. But they are not the best way to prevent pregnancy. To avoid both STIs and pregnancy, use condoms along with another type of birth control.
- **Whether you've had a problem with one kind of birth control.** Finding the best method of birth control may involve trying something different. Also, you may need to change a method that once worked well for you.
- **Whether you want children.** If you are positive you don't want children, a lasting method of birth control might be best.
- **Your health issues.** Some birth control methods may not be safe for you, depending on your health issues. For example, women who smoke, are breastfeeding, or have had breast cancer may not be able to use certain methods.

How can you get birth control?

- You can buy:
 - Condoms, sponges, and spermicides without a prescription in drugstores, online, and in many grocery stores.
 - Some forms of emergency contraception without a prescription at most drugstores.
- You need to see a doctor or visit a family planning clinic to:
 - Get a prescription for birth control pills and other methods that use hormones.
 - Have an implant or IUD inserted, including the type of IUD used for emergency contraception.
 - Get a hormone shot.
 - Get a prescription for a diaphragm or cervical cap.
 - Get a prescription for certain kinds of emergency contraception.

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