



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists

FAQ

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ112  
ESPECIALLY FOR TEENS

## Birth Control

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### **What things should I think about when choosing a birth control method?**

To choose the right birth control method for you, consider the following:

- How well it prevents pregnancy
- How easy it is to use
- Whether you need a prescription to get it
- Whether it protects against **sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)**
- Whether you have any health problems

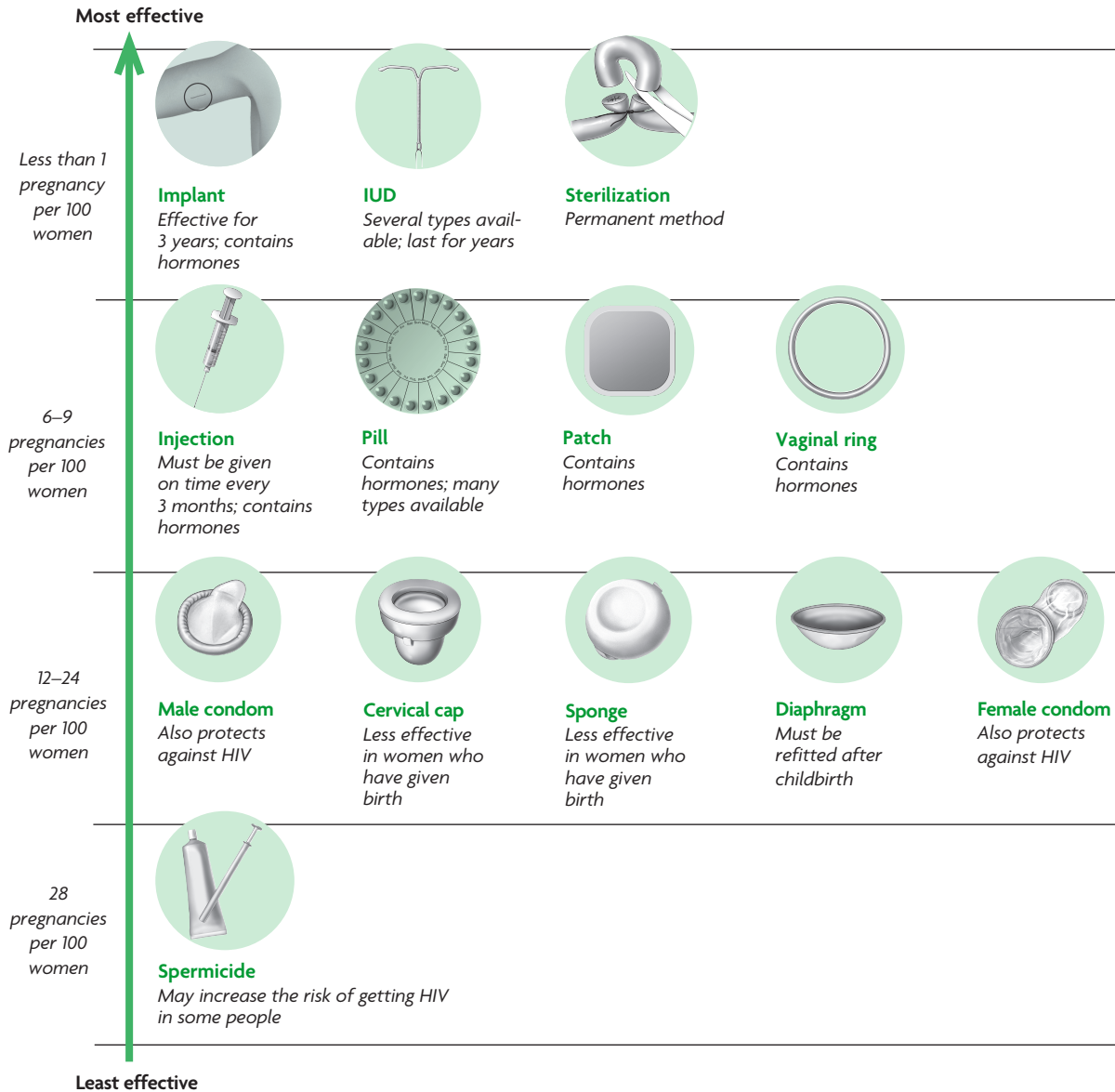
### **Do I need to have a pelvic exam to get birth control from my health care provider?**

A **pelvic exam** is not needed to get most forms of birth control from a health care provider except for the intrauterine device (IUD), diaphragm, and cervical cap. If you have already had sex, you may need to have a pregnancy test and STD test before birth control can be prescribed.

## Which birth control methods are the best at preventing pregnancy?

The following table shows all of the birth control methods and how well they protect against pregnancy.

**Table 1. Effectiveness of Birth Control Methods\***



HIV = human immunodeficiency virus; IUD = intrauterine device

\*Other methods include fertility awareness-based methods and the lactational amenorrhea method (LAM) that can be used during the first 6 months of breastfeeding. Discuss these options with your health care provider.

## Which birth control methods also protect against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

The male latex or polyurethane condom gives the best protection against STDs. The female condom provides some protection. With all other methods, you also should use a male or female condom to protect against STDs.

## What is the birth control pill?

The birth control pill is a pill that you have to take every day at the same time each day. It contains **hormones** that prevent pregnancy. There are many types of birth control pills. Your health care provider can help you choose the right one for you.

If you miss a pill, you need to know what to do. Read the directions that came with your pack of pills. You also may want to contact your health care provider.

### What is the skin patch?

The patch is a small (1.75 square inch) adhesive patch that is worn on the skin. It contains hormones that are slowly released into your body through the skin. A new patch is worn for a week at a time for 3 weeks in a row. During the fourth week, a patch is not worn, and you will have your menstrual period.

### What is the vaginal ring?

The ring is a flexible plastic ring that you insert into the upper **vagina**. It releases hormones into your body. It is worn inside the vagina for 21 days and then removed for 7 days. During those 7 days, you will have your menstrual period. Then you insert a new ring.

### What is the birth control shot?

This shot is given in the upper arm or buttock every 3 months. It contains hormones that prevent pregnancy.

### What is the implant?

The implant is a small plastic rod about the size of a matchstick that your health care provider inserts under the skin of the upper arm. It releases hormones. The implant protects against pregnancy for 3 years.

### What is the intrauterine device (IUD)?

The intrauterine device (IUD) is a small, T-shaped, plastic device that is inserted and left inside the uterus. The IUD must be inserted and removed by a health care provider. Three types are available in the United States. Two contain hormones and last for 3 years and 5 years. The third type is the copper IUD. It lasts for as long as 10 years.

### What are spermicides?

These are chemicals that are put into the vagina to make **sperm** inactive. There are many types of spermicides: foam, gel, cream, film (thin sheets), or suppositories (solid inserts that melt after they are inserted into the vagina).

Frequent use of spermicides may increase the risk of getting **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** from an infected partner. Spermicides should only be used if you are at low risk of HIV infection.

### What are condoms?

Condoms come in male and female versions. The male condom ("rubber") covers the **penis** and catches the sperm after a man ejaculates. The female condom is a thin plastic pouch that lines the vagina. It prevents sperm from reaching the **uterus**. Condoms work better to prevent pregnancy when used with a spermicide. Spermicides should only be used if you are at low risk of HIV infection.

### What is the diaphragm?

The diaphragm is a small dome-shaped device made of latex or silicone that fits inside the vagina and covers the **cervix**. You need a prescription for it. A health care provider needs to do a pelvic exam to find the right size of diaphragm for you. It always is used with a spermicide. Birth control methods that need spermicides to work should only be used if you are at low risk of HIV infection.

### What is the cervical cap?

The cervical cap is a small, thin latex or plastic dome shaped like a thimble. It fits tightly over the cervix. You need a prescription for it. A health care provider needs to do a pelvic exam to find the right size for you. The cervical cap must be used with a spermicide. Birth control methods that need spermicides to work should only be used if you are at low risk of HIV infection.

### What is the sponge?

The sponge can be bought without a prescription at drugstores and other stores. It is a doughnut-shaped device made of soft foam that is coated with spermicide. It is pushed up in the vagina to cover the cervix. Birth control methods that have spermicides should only be used if you are at low risk of HIV infection.

### What is emergency birth control?

If you have sex without using any birth control, if the birth control method did not work (for instance, the condom broke during sex), or if you are raped, you can use emergency birth control to prevent pregnancy. Emergency birth control is available in pill form or as a copper IUD. The pills must be taken or the IUD inserted within 5 days of having unprotected sex.

### What are the types of emergency birth control pills?

There are three types of emergency birth control pills: 1) the progestin-only pill, 2) regular birth control pills taken in certain amounts, and 3) ulipristal.

### Where can I get emergency birth control?

Ulipristal and combination birth control pills are available only by prescription. One type of progestin-only pill (Plan B One-Step) is available on pharmacy store shelves without a prescription to anyone of any age. Another type of progestin-only

pill (Next Choice One Dose) is available behind the pharmacy counter without a prescription to anyone 17 years or older if you show proof of age and by prescription if you are younger than 17 years (see FAQ114 [Emergency Contraception](#)). If you need more information about emergency birth control or need to find a health care provider who can provide a prescription, go to [www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com) or call the emergency birth control hotline at 1-888-NOT-2-LATE.

## Glossary

**Cervix:** The lower, narrow end of the uterus at the top of the vagina.

**Hormones:** Substances made in the body by cells or organs that control the function of cells or organs. An example is estrogen, which controls the function of female reproductive organs.

**Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV):** A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system and causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

**Pelvic Exam:** A physical examination of a woman's reproductive organs.

**Penis:** An external male sex organ.

**Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs):** Diseases that are spread by sexual contact, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus infection, herpes, syphilis, and infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS]).

**Sperm:** A cell produced in the male testes that can fertilize a female egg cell.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

**Vagina:** A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles leading from the uterus to the outside of the body.

## If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

**FAQ112:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to the institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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