

What You Should Know About Today's Hormonal Contraceptive Options

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Advances in contraception have had a great impact on women. Contraception saves women's lives by reducing both unintended and ectopic pregnancies, and it has enabled women to space their pregnancies for the health of themselves and their children.

Over half the college students in the United States are women. The freedom to use contraception has made it possible for women to attain higher education, support their families, pursue careers and political power, and provide community service at levels not seen before in history.



General Contraceptive Options

Q I have been taking the Pill without having a period. I take the Pill continuously. Is it safe not to have a period? Where does the blood go?

A Several studies show there is no harm in taking contraceptive pills continuously. The pills thin the endometrium (the

inside layer of the uterus), so there is no area from which to bleed. Taking the Pill continuously is perfectly safe and does not affect a woman's ability to have children when she stops the Pill. Ask your health care provider to discuss this with you. There is no reason women need to have a period; it's your choice...period.

Q I gain weight easily, and I have heard that birth control can cause weight gain. Is this true, and if so, what method should I use?

A Studies show that pills, rings, patches, and intrauterine devices (IUDs) do not increase weight gain.

Q I heard on the news that the Pill can decrease premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Is this true?

A So far only one type of birth control pill has shown a decrease in PMS. Recently, a contraceptive pill with a progestin-like substance called drospirenone has been shown to produce less anxiety, irritability, feeling sad or blue, and weight gain.

Q I have really bad cramping with my periods. My girlfriend told me the Pill helps stop her cramping. Is this true?

A Yes, birth control pills, patches, rings, injectables, and the levonorgestrel-releasing intrauterine system (LNG-IUS) all decrease uterine cramping and decrease the amount of bleeding during the hormonal withdrawal phase.

Q My doctor told me I have endometriosis, and I have really bad cramping with my periods. My doctor told me to use the Pill to decrease the pain. Is there anything else I can use?

A Yes. The ring, the patch, the LNG-IUS, and injections will all decrease painful periods for

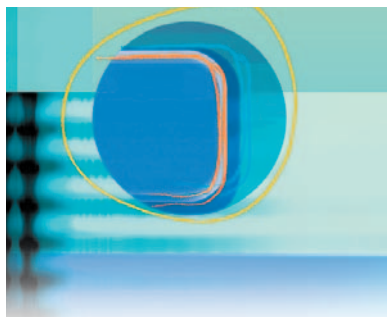
you. Continuous use of pills, patches, or rings will decrease your cramping even more.

Q I've had cysts on my ovaries. Will birth control make cysts worse?

A Methods of birth control that inhibit ovulation decrease the chances of developing ovarian cysts. Examples of such methods are pills, rings, patches, and injections of depot medroxyprogesterone acetate (DMPA). The LNG-IUS does not completely stop ovulation and can increase the risk of developing ovarian cysts by 8% to 12%.

Q My mother worries that taking the Pill will cause cancer. What should I tell her?

A The good news is that birth control pills actually protect women from two different types of cancers: endometrial and ovarian. Pills cut the risk of endometrial cancer by about half, and DMPA decreases the risk of this type of cancer by 40%. The ring and patch probably reduce the risk of both endometrial and ovarian cancers, but we do not have studies yet to verify this protection.

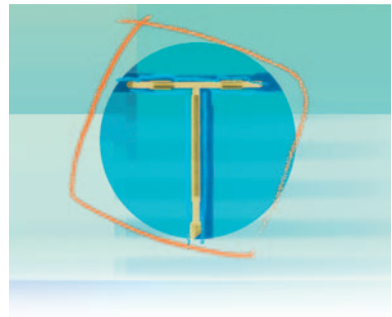


Q My midwife told me that I can start the birth control pills right in her office and don't have to wait to have my period. If I do this, will I have more spotting?

A The "quick start" method, in which women start their pills, patches, or rings the same day they see their clinician, is common. Studies have shown no increase in bleeding, and this method helps women use their chosen contraceptive more effectively.

Q My girlfriend and her boyfriend had their condom break. Her boyfriend told her about a morning-after pill she could take to keep her from getting pregnant. She said it worked. What's it called, and does it cause abortion or a miscarriage?

A The morning-after pill is commonly referred to as emergency contraception (EC). In some states, you can get EC directly from your pharmacist, but in most states you will need a prescription. For a health care provider who will help you get EC in your area call 1-888-NOT2-LATE (1-888-668-2528), a 24-hour hotline. Emergency contraception consists of two white pills that are taken together. It is best to take EC within 72 hours of unprotected sex. However, EC can work up to 120 hours (5 days) after intercourse. Emergency contraception will not cause miscarriage and will



not work if a woman is already pregnant. Emergency contraception will not harm a developing embryo; however, women should have a pregnancy test before taking EC because if the test is positive, there is no reason to take it.

Q Can I use my current birth control pill, patch, injectable, or ring continuously without having a period?

A Yes, you can use pills, rings, patches, or injectables continuously. It is not harmful not to have periods. When women use these methods in traditional ways, the period is not a true menses but a withdrawal bleeding from the uterine lining once the hormones are stopped for the pill-free period. Continuous use of these products keeps the uterine lining thin, so there is no bleeding. This may actually prevent endometrial and ovarian cancers.

Q I have been using DMPA for years, but I just heard about the black box warning. What does this mean? Should I stop using it?

A The US Food and Drug Administration has issued a warning that using DMPA for 2 or more years can decrease bone mineral density (BMD). This may be of greatest concern in adolescent women who are building bone foundation. A 2005 study found that after 2 to 3 years of taking DMPA, teenaged girls do lose some BMD, but that after DMPA is stopped, there is some regeneration. However, with long-term use of DMPA, BMD should be evaluated. After 2 or more years of use of DMPA, teens should reassess contraceptive use and consider other reliable methods of birth control. All women should consider calcium and vitamin D supplements for bone health, whether or not they use DMPA.

The Patch

Q I have been using the contraceptive patch, and occasionally it peels off. What should I do?

A Apply your patch to clean, dry skin. Bath oils and even moisturizing lotions or soaps may decrease the adhesiveness of the patch. Applying alcohol and letting the skin dry may help the patch stick better. Consider the placement of your patch. Apply it to an area where it will not be frequently rubbed by clothing.

Q I weigh 203 pounds, and the physician assistant who takes care of me said that the patch might not be as

effective because of my weight. I don't want to get pregnant. What should I do?

A Yes, the patch is less effective in heavier women. The ring, the copper IUD, the LNG-IUS, and the DMPA injection are more effective.

Intrauterine Devices/Injectables

Q I read in a magazine that birth control can decrease the calcium in my bones; should I take more calcium every day?

A All women should be taking calcium every day. However, rings, patches, pills, and IUDs or systems do not deplete your calcium levels.

Q I have really painful periods and get anemic from them. My health care provider recommended a certain type of intrauterine contraception. What is it?

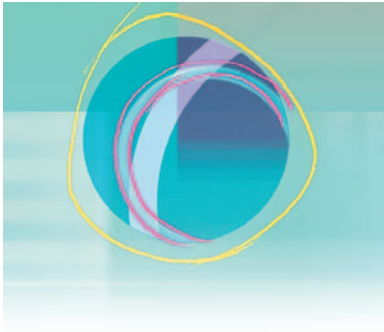


A The LNG-IUS is a soft, small device that is placed gently in a woman's uterus and prevents pregnancy. It also dramatically reduces menstrual pain and heavy bleeding during periods. The LNG-IUS can also benefit women with endometriosis and can be used for up to 5 years. Currently the LNG-IUS is the most effective reversible form of contraception available; it is as effective as tubal ligation sterilization.

Q I'm in the Navy and I want to use a long-term method of birth control that I

CONTRACEPTIVE OPTION RESOURCES

- Advocates for Youth at www.advocatesforyouth.org.
- Association for Reproductive Health Professionals at www.arhp.org.
- The Emergency Contraception Web Site at www.not-2-late.com.
- Family Health International at www.fhi.org.
- International Planned Parenthood Federation at www.ippf.org.
- The National Campaign to Prevent Youth Pregnancy at www.teenpregnancy.org.



don't have to worry about for the next 3 years. What is available for me?

A You have several excellent options. The IUDs or systems have several benefits; for example, the copper IUD is as effective as sterilization and can be used for 10 to 12 years continuously. The LNG-IUS is as effective as tubal ligation and can be worn for at least 5 years. Women using IUDs tend to be the most satisfied with their method. Both methods are highly reversible, and the medicated LNG-IUS also significantly reduces menstrual bleeding and cramping. A third consideration is the injectable method in which a woman receives an injection every 12 weeks; most women using this method have very little bleeding.

The Vaginal Ring

Q I like my contraceptive ring, but sometimes I don't want it in during sex; what should I do?

A It is perfectly safe and will not decrease the effectiveness if you remove your ring for up to 3 hours in one 24-hour period.

Q My nurse practitioner told me that the contraceptive ring can help my vagina stay healthier and that I may get fewer infections from bacterial vaginosis. Is this true?

A Yes, the ring can help improve the number of the good bacteria that prevent an overgrowth of harmful bacteria in the vagina.

Q When I put the ring in my vagina at the doctor's office, it was really easy, but I am worried that it will cause a bad smell if I wear it for 3 weeks at a time. What should I expect?

A The ring does not cause any odor and actually keeps your vagina healthy. A recent study with electron microscope scans showed that the ring had no embedded bacteria in it after 1 month of use.

Q I left my ring in for 30 days and forgot to take it out and insert a new one. Will I get pregnant?

A No, the ring can be used up to 25 days continuously and inhibit ovulation. However, if you chose the ring for continuous use, it is usually easier to leave it in for 30 days, then remove it and insert a new one.

Q I am using the ring for my birth control method and like it, but I don't know if I can use a tampon with the ring inside me. Also, can I use vaginal creams for a yeast infection with the ring in place?

A Yes, with the ring in place, you can use tampons, as well as vaginal creams to treat a yeast infection. Antifungal creams will not decrease the effectiveness of the ring, and antibiotics such as erythromycin and tetracycline will not decrease the effectiveness of the ring, either.

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