

The Best Birth Control for Your Health

Birth control is a personal choice for each user. It's important that proper planning and research is done before making decisions on birth control, especially if you're looking at a long term option.

I did not feel that I was properly warned about the side effects of most of my birth control options when making this decision for the first time. The reality is that any hormonal birth control option is likely to have major side effects.

I've put together a guide of some of the most popular forms of birth control, both hormonal and nonhormonal, as well as my personal recommendations.

Hormonal birth control is known to cause serious health problems in many cases. Taking hormonal birth control can cause everything from serious mood swings and emotional changes to a variety of different cancers and other life-threatening conditions.

Not all non-hormonal birth control options are perfect though. Many non-hormonal birth controls have health draw-backs, although most of them are minor compared to hormonal options.

When talking about the effectiveness of birth control, the numbers report how many people get pregnant each year on that particular form of birth control. For example, if you're birth control is 90% effective, one in 10 people using that form of birth control will get pregnant each year.

Non Hormonal Birth Control

Copper IUD

The copper IUD is the only non-hormonal low maintenance, long term birth control method that I am aware of. It is better for your health than a hormonal birth control option, but it's not great. The copper IUD is a T-shaped device placed into the uterus by a doctor. The copper IUD makes the uterine environment inhabitable to sperm.

The copper IUD can cause heavy bleeding and cramps. The extra stress of having a foreign object inside the uterus causes heavy periods as the body tries to dispel the foreign object. It has other risks as well. The copper IUD can cause:

- Menstrual problems (irregular periods, heavier periods, longer periods, etc.)
- Cramps and dizziness after insertion
- Ovarian cysts
- Expulsion (the body rejecting the IUD)
- Infection
- Puncturing the uterine wall
- Pelvic inflammatory disease
- Ectopic pregnancy
- Miscarriages
- Intrauterine pregnancy

The copper IUD can have serious health side effects, but it is a very convenient, hassle-free form of birth control after implantation, in many ways (side effects aside). The copper IUD requires a prescription from a doctor and implantation by a doctor. It can be free if covered by your health insurance, but otherwise, it can cost upwards of \$900.

Spermicide

Spermicide is a chemical that prevents pregnancy by killing sperm. The active ingredient is nonoxynol-9, and it is available in multiple forms.

Spermicide can cause mild skin irritation. Some people may be allergic to the ingredients. An unhealthy gut generally causes allergies, so if your gut is healthy, this shouldn't be a problem. Spermicide needs to be inserted at least 10-15 minutes before you have sex, which can be inconvenient for some. Spermicide is also only effective for about an hour, which can also be inconvenient. Some spermicides have a funny taste.

Spermicide alone is anywhere from 70-80% effective. Combined with condoms and used properly, this method is 97% effective.

Spermicide does not protect against STDs. Long term spermicide use can make some more susceptible to HIV and other STDs, but again, I wouldn't worry about this if you are healthy.

Spermicide is available without a prescription at any pharmacy or store where you would buy contraceptives. It usually ranges in cost from about \$8-\$15 per kit. Read and follow the directions carefully.

Fertility Awareness

Fertility awareness involves tracking your cycle and avoiding sex on the days you're most fertile. When done correctly, it can be an effective form of birth control, but it can be difficult (or impossible) to track your fertility effectively if you aren't extremely healthy.

This method can also be inconvenient, as it means not having sex on your most fertile days, or at least not having sex on those days without relying on other forms of protection.

Irregular periods make it difficult to track your most fertile days. And it is important to note that sperm can live in the female reproductive tract for as long as five days. If avoiding pregnancy is your number one priority, I would not recommend this method of birth control.

Breastfeeding

Obviously, breastfeeding is only a valid form of birth control after you've already had a baby, and it only works for so long. The longer you are able to breastfeed, the better for the baby and the longer you have a natural form of birth control. Most of the mainstream sources consider this method of birth control to be effective for 6 months postpartum, but the healthier you are the longer you'll be able to use breastfeeding as a form of birth control. This is an extremely effective method of birth control when done right, and it's free. This method of birth control can work for 2-3 years if you're healthy, but when your period returns, you'll want to find another form of birth control.

Barrier Method Birth Control

Barrier method birth control coupled with spermicide is my recommended form of birth control. Many barrier methods are only 80-85% effective with typical use. This accounts for user error and malfunctions. For this reason, barrier methods coupled with spermicide make for an extremely effective method of birth control with little to no side effects.

The Birth Control Sponge

The birth control sponge is a round piece of foam-filled with spermicide that you insert into your vagina close to the base of the cervix before having sex. It prevents sperm from fertilizing the egg by covering the cervix and continually

releasing spermicide. The sponge also absorbs sperm.

The sponge must be kept in at least 6 hours after having sex. According to doctors, the sponge can be inserted up to 24 hours before sex, although you should not keep the sponge inside for more than 30 hours. I personally wouldn't leave it in for more than 6 hours.

Sponges are available at most drugstores and available without a prescription. With perfect use, the sponge is about 91% effective if you've never given birth. If you have given birth, with perfect use, the sponge is about 80% effective. Using the sponge perfectly every time can be difficult, so in reality, the sponge is about 88% effective for those who have never given birth, and 76% effective for those who have.

The sponge coupled with a condom is a highly effective form of birth control. The planning required to use the sponge is not ideal for everyone. The sponge has all the side effects of spermicide, as it has spermicide in it. The sponge can also increase the risk of toxic shock syndrome (TSS). For this reason, the sponge is not considered a safe birth control option when you're on your period. Overall, this method of birth control isn't the most effective option, and I recommend just spermicide over the sponge.

Cervical Caps

A cervical cap is a small cup made from soft silicone that you put inside your vagina to cover your cervix. In order to be as effective as possible, the cervical cap should be paired with spermicide.

The cervical cap is 86% effective if you've never given birth and 71% effective if you have given birth. Doctors say the cervical cap is safe to leave inside for 48 hours, although I wouldn't recommend leaving any foreign object inside your body for that long.

The cervical cap needs to be left in at least 6 hours after having sex in order to be as effective as possible. Like the sponge, the cervical cap has all the same side effects including increased risk for TSS, HIV, and other STDs and is not considered a safe birth control option when you are on your period.

Compared to the diaphragm, a cervical cap fits more snugly against the opening of the cervix. The cap is shaped like a small sailor's hat. The diaphragm is shaped like a shallow latex cup. (Read more about diaphragms below.)

The cervical cap comes in different sizes. In order to get one, you'll need to be fitted for one by your doctor and given a prescription. The cost range is \$0-\$75, depending on your health insurance.

Diaphragms

The diaphragm is similar to the cervical cap and the sponge in that it blocks sperm from the cervix. It is a shallow cup that covers the cervix and surrounding areas. It is best coupled with spermicide to be as effective as possible.

The diaphragm is more effective at preventing pregnancy than the cervical cap. With perfect use, the diaphragm is about 94% effective, but with typical average use, the diaphragm is about 88% effective.

The diaphragm cannot be left in as long as the cervical cap, (24 hours compared to 48 hours). Like the cervical cap, you have to leave the diaphragm in for 6 hours after having sex.

The diaphragm has all the similar side effects and problems as the sponge and the cervical caps. Any solid foreign object that you insert into the body for long periods of time, isn't great for you.

Diaphragms come in different sizes so you'll need to be fitted

for one and given a prescription from a doctor.

Condoms

Condoms are the only birth control method on the market that protects against STDs. It wasn't until recently that I realized, just like any other disease or infection, contracting an STD is a sign of a poor immune system and overall poor health. If you have a healthy gut and a strong immune system, it's very likely that STDs won't ever be a problem for you.

With typical use, condoms are about 85% effective. With perfect use, condoms are 98% effective. Condoms are relatively cheap and easily accessible at any pharmacy or store where you would otherwise buy contraceptives.

Hormonal Birth Control

My only personal experience with hormonal birth control is the pill. I took the pill for about 6 weeks when I was 18. I found that it made me extremely nauseous on a daily basis, though this was prior to my conversion to an organic lifestyle.

I have friends who use hormonal IUDs and friends who have used the NuvaRing. My friend who uses the NuvaRing just had a lump removed from her breast, at age 19. My friend who uses the hormonal IUD is plagued with horrible cramping and menstrual cycle problems whenever she does have a period, although they are irregular and infrequent.

Any hormonal birth control requires a prescription and can be difficult to get without health insurance. Generally, hormonal birth control methods are much more effective than other methods, and people like them because they are usually a hassle-free way to prevent pregnancy.

Many doctors will say that hormonal birth control is safe to use and that it's completely safe to skip periods. I don't agree with this. Messing with your body's natural cycle is not good for you and can have consequences. Some of the side effects of hormonal birth control include:

- Mood swings
- Menstrual changes (heavier periods, irregular periods, etc)
- Reduced sex drive (or overall changes in sex drive)
- Headaches and migraines
- Nausea
- Thyroid imbalances
- Adrenal problems
- Anxiety and depression
- Fertility problems
- Gut imbalances (increased risk for IBS, Crohn's disease, leaky gut, etc)
- Increased risk for blood clots, stroke, and heart attack
- Increased risk for certain cancers, such as cervical cancer, breast cancer, and ovarian cancer

These are general side effects of any form of hormonal birth control. Below I've gotten into the specifics of the different hormonal birth controls and how they work. Keep in mind, the side effects and problems with hormonal birth control are fairly similar across the board, and they all work in similar ways. Because all hormonal birth control works using progestin and estrogen to stop ovulation and thicken the mucus lining in the cervix, all hormonal birth control methods have similar problems and side effects.

The Pill

The birth control pill is a hormonal pill that blocks ovulation and thickens the mucus in your cervix to prevent pregnancy. With perfect use, the pill is 99% effective, but

many people forget to take it every day, and for that reason, it's realistically around 91% effective. Like all hormonal birth control methods, the pill has a plethora of side effects. The pill requires a prescription by a doctor and can be upwards of \$50 without health insurance.

Nuva Ring

The NuvaRing is 99% effective with perfect use, but only 91% effective with average use. It's is a small flexible ring that you wear inside your vagina. You can wear the ring for up to 5 weeks at a time. If you want to skip periods, you put a new ring in immediately. If you don't want to skip periods, you wait a week before putting a new one in. The NuvaRing needs to be taken out at the same time each time you change it. The NuvaRing is another convenient minimal effort form of birth control. It can be left in during sex and requires very little forethought. Of course, like all hormonal birth control methods, the Nuvaring is not good for you and can have some serious side effects. People often experience headaches, nausea, sore breasts, changes to their periods, and spotting or brown discharge.

The Patch

The patch works like the pill and other methods of hormonal birth control. It releases progestin and estrogen to stop ovulation and thicken the mucus on the cervix wall. With perfect use, the patch is about 99% effective, but in reality, the patch is 91% effective with typical use. The patch needs to be changed once a week and goes on the belly, upper outer arm, buttocks, or back. People commonly experience headaches, nausea, sore breasts, change in periods, and sore skin where the patch goes. The patch requires a prescription and can cost upwards of \$150 without health insurance.

Implants

The implant is a tiny rod the size of a match that your doctor implants into the skin on the upper arm. The implant can last up to five years but can be removed at any time. Common side effects are light bleeding, brown discharge, and heavier and longer periods. People also report their periods go away with the implant. Anything that deviates from your body's natural cycle is not the best thing for you. People also experience headaches, breast pain, weight gain, and ovarian cysts. The implant is more than 99% effective and extremely convenient, but we don't recommend sacrificing your health for convenience especially in a way that messes with your body's natural cycle.

Shots

The shot uses progestin to block ovulation and thicken the cervical mucus. You have to get a new shot every 12-13 weeks. With perfect use, the shot is 99% effective, but many people forget to get their shots on time, making them 94% effective. The shot can have serious side effects, like all hormonal birth control. The shot requires a prescription, and administration by a doctor and typically ranges from \$0-\$150 per shot, depending on your insurance. The last time I saw a conventional doctor, nearly three years ago, she did not recommend the shot for health reasons.

Hormonal IUD

The hormonal IUD goes in just like the copper IUD, but releases hormones into the uterus. The hormonal IUD releases progestin to stop ovulation and thicken the mucus of the cervix wall. The hormonal IUD has all the side effects and problems that other forms of hormonal birth control have. It is, however, one of, if not the most effective form of birth

control. After the IUD is inserted, it's good for several years. It's 99% effective and hassle-free after implantation (minus the side effects, of course). The IUD has to be prescribed and inserted by a doctor. While this is probably the most effective form of birth control, it's likely the most dangerous as well. Not only does this birth control release hormones, but your body also has to constantly compensate for the foreign object in your uterus, and it can take quite the toll. If you continue to have periods while using an IUD, it's likely that they will be much more uncomfortable and hard on the body. Unlike the other forms of birth control (with the exception of the implant) your body gets no break from the contraceptive.

Conclusion

Choosing the best method of birth control for your needs can be time-consuming and difficult. There's a lot of options to consider, and everyone has different needs and priorities when it comes to what kind of birth control works best for them. If health is your top priority when considering birth control, the condom spermicide route may be the best option for preventing pregnancy with fewer side effects than other methods.

Sources:

- *Spermicides: How Effective Are Spermicidal Foams and Jellies?*
- *Copper IUD (ParaGard)*
- *About the Birth Control Sponge*
- *Birth Control Methods & Options | Types of Birth Control*
- *Paraguard Drug Precautions*