



## Patient education: Choosing birth control (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

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### What is birth control?

Birth control is a term used to describe ways to prevent pregnancy. Another word for birth control is "contraception."

Different types of birth control include medicines, devices, and procedures. Some types of birth control are used by women, and others are used by men. Some types need to be used every time a person has sex. Other types can prevent pregnancy for long periods of time. Some types need a doctor's prescription, and others do not.

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### Which type of birth control should I choose?

There are many different types of birth control. Your doctor or nurse can work with you to choose the type that is right for you. To help you make a decision, think about:

- How well it prevents pregnancy – No birth control works 100 percent perfectly all the time, but some prevent pregnancy better than others.
- How often you have to use it – For example, women who use birth control pills must take them every day. There are other types, like condoms, that you use only when you have sex.
- How easy it is to use
- Its side effects or downsides
- How much it costs
- If you think you might want to get pregnant in the future – Some types of birth control are permanent, meaning they prevent you from ever getting pregnant. Other types of birth control prevent pregnancy only for a limited amount of time. After that time, you can still get pregnant.

- How soon you might want to get pregnant in the future – Some types of birth control can be started and stopped quickly. Other types can prevent pregnancy for several years.
  - Whether it protects you from infection – Only male and female condoms can reduce your chance of getting certain infections called "STIs" (sexually transmitted infections).
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## What are the different types of birth control and how do they work?

Different types of birth control prevent pregnancy in different ways ([table 1](#)). They also have different levels of effectiveness, meaning some work better than others. Each of the main types is discussed in more detail separately. They include:

- Permanent procedures, such as vasectomy (for men) or having your "tubes tied" (for women)
  - Long-acting methods, such as the IUD or implant
  - Hormonal birth control, such as the pill, injection, patch, or ring
  - "Pericoital" birth control you use at the time of sex, such as diaphragms and spermicidal sponges
  - Barrier methods, such as condoms
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## What about natural forms of birth control?

There are a few forms of "natural" birth control, which require no medicines or devices. But they are some of the least effective forms of birth control. Natural birth control methods include:

- Withdrawal – This is when the man pulls out before he ejaculates.
  - Fertility awareness – This is when the woman keeps track of her menstrual cycle so she can predict when she is most likely to get pregnant each month. Then, she avoids sex during that time, or uses some form of birth control then, such as a condom.
  - Breastfeeding – Breastfeeding can decrease a woman's ability to get pregnant. Some women use it as a form of birth control for the first few weeks after a baby is born. But for it to work, breast milk should be the baby's only food. The medical term for this method is "lactational amenorrhea method," or "LAM." If you decide to try this method, discuss it with your doctor or nurse.
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## What if I have problems with my birth control?

Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any side effects or problems with your birth control. Sometimes, side effects will go away after a few months. If they don't, you might need to work with your doctor or nurse to find a different type of birth control.

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[Patient education: Intrauterine devices \(IUD\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Long-acting methods of birth control \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Emergency contraception \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Permanent birth control for women \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Vasectomy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Birth control; which method is right for me? \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Hormonal methods of birth control \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Barrier and pericoital methods of birth control \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Long-acting methods of birth control \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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## GRAPHICS

### Types of birth control

Type	Methods included	Some information
Pericoital methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Diaphragm</li> <li>▪ Cervical cap</li> <li>▪ Sponge</li> <li>▪ Spermicide</li> </ul>	"Pericoital" means methods that are used every time you have sex. The diaphragm, cervical cap, and sponge are used along with spermicide. Spermicide is a cream or gel that kills sperm before it can get to a woman's egg. It can also be used alone, but is not as effective this way.
Barrier methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Male condom</li> <li>▪ Female condom</li> </ul>	Barrier methods block sperm from getting into the uterus and reaching a woman's egg. Condoms are the only form of birth control that can also protect against infections you can get through sex.
Short-acting hormonal methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shot/injection</li> <li>▪ Progestin-only pill</li> <li>▪ Estrogen-progestin pill</li> <li>▪ Patch</li> <li>▪ Vaginal ring</li> </ul>	These methods all use hormones to cause changes in a woman's body that reduce the chance of pregnancy. The different options require a different amount of attention. For example, women having shots must see their doctor every 3 months for a shot. Women taking pills must take a pill every day. Women using the patch or the ring must change it once a week.
Long-acting methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Implantable rod</li> <li>▪ Intrauterine device (IUD) with progestin</li> <li>▪ IUD with copper</li> </ul>	The implantable rod and the IUD with progestin both use hormones to prevent pregnancy. The IUD with copper releases copper to prevent pregnancy. These stay in the body and keep working for 3 to 10 years, depending on the type chosen.
Permanent methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Vasectomy (for men)</li> <li>▪ Tubal occlusion or ligation (for women)</li> </ul>	These methods involve procedures or surgery and are permanent.