

Contraception at a glance

The pill and condoms are the most commonly used contraceptives, but there are other methods that are also very reliable. The option that is best for you depends on your current lifestyle and your personal needs.

Your doctor can help you choose the option that is right for you and can advise you on any potential health risks. A family planning clinic can also help you choose a suitable method of contraception.

THE PILL usually contains a combination of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone and must be prescribed by a doctor. Some versions contain particularly low levels of hormones.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: The pill mainly works by stopping ovulation, which prevents fertilisation. Depending on the version you use, it is taken every day for 21 or 24 days, at which time you will have your period. Used correctly, the pill provides virtually perfect protection from day one.

+ PROS: Very reliable and effective protection against pregnancy. Germany's statutory health insurance funds cover the cost of the pill for women under the age of 22. Women aged 18 and over must pay for part of the cost themselves.

- CONS: Many users may find it difficult to remember to take the pill every day. Side effects such as nausea, vertigo, headache and loss of libido may occur. Users – especially those who smoke – also have a slightly increased risk of blood clots (thrombosis).

THE MINI PILL contains either levonorgestrel or desogestrel.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: The mini pill containing levonorgestrel must always be taken on time to ensure that it works reliably. It works by thickening the mucus in the cervix to prevent sperm from entering the uterus. It also prevents the endometrium from thickening enough for a fertilised egg to attach. The hormone desogestrel prevents ovulation, making it a more reliably effective form of contraception.

+ PROS: The mini pill generally has fewer side effects than the combination pill. It is particularly well suited for women who cannot tolerate oestrogen and is recommended for women who are breastfeeding but still want to use hormonal contraception.

- CONS: The mini pill containing levonorgestrel will not provide reliable protection if taken more than three hours late. The version containing desogestrel is no longer effective if taken more than twelve hours late. Side effects may include headache, acne, breast tenderness and mood swings.

CONDOMS are usually made of latex and are rolled onto the erect penis.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: A condom prevents sperm from entering the vagina. When put on correctly, it remains firmly in place. After ejaculation, it must be held in place at the base of the penis while pulling it out of the vagina. Condoms are a reliable method of contraception if used correctly and regularly. It is also essential to use the correct size (see www.kondometer.de).

+ PROS: With the exception of latex allergies, which are rare, condoms do not have any side effects. They are also the only method of contraception that lowers the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection such as HIV during sexual intercourse.

- CONS: Some women may find it hard to ask their partner to wear a condom for protection – even though it is their right to do so!

A COPPER IUD consists of a plastic core wrapped in thin copper wire. Various shapes and sizes are available. It is inserted into the uterus by a doctor and provides protection for three to ten years.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: The copper released by the IUD changes the mucosal lining of the cervix and restricts the ability of sperm to move, preventing the implantation of fertilised eggs. Copper IUDs provide highly reliable contraceptive protection.

+ PROS: No further contraception is necessary as long as the IUD remains in the uterus.

- CONS: IUDs increase menstrual flow in most women and may also increase menstrual cramps. Girls and young women in particular may have a higher risk of expulsion of the IUD from the uterus during the first few months of use.

A HORMONAL IUD is made of plastic and contains a small reserve of hormones. It is inserted into the uterus by a doctor and can be left in for up to five years.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: A hormonal IUD prevents the build-up of the endometrial lining and makes it difficult for sperm to reach the egg. It does not suppress ovulation.

+ PROS: Very reliable and effective protection against pregnancy. It often reduces menstrual flow in women with heavy periods.

- CONS: Some women may find it disturbing to have irregular or missed periods. Side effects are less common and less severe than with other hormonal contraceptives, but usually tend to occur in the first three months.

A CONTRACEPTIVE IMPLANT is a flexible rod containing progesterone that is inserted under the skin.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: Implants suppress ovulation, change the lining of the cervical canal and inhibit the build-up of the endometrial lining. Contraceptive implants provide excellent contraceptive protection.

+ PROS: The implant is effective for up to three years. During that time, no further contraception is necessary.

- CONS: The side effects are similar to those of the mini pill. Changes in menstrual cycle with irregular intermenstrual bleeding are common.

QUARTERLY INJECTIONS contain the hormone progesterone and are injected into the buttocks. They should only be used by women who cannot use other methods.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: Progesterone suppresses ovulation and prevents sperm from entering the uterus. Quarterly injections provide good contraceptive protection.

+ PROS: Women are protected from getting pregnant for three months after each injection.

- CONS: Side effects such as intermenstrual bleeding, headache, anxiety and weight gain are more common than with other methods containing progesterone.

A VAGINAL RING is a flexible plastic ring containing hormones that is inserted into the vagina, where it remains for a period of three weeks. After four weeks, you will get your period.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: A combination of oestrogen and progesterone suppresses ovulation and prevents sperm from entering the uterus. When used correctly, a vaginal ring provides very reliable protection.

+ PROS: A vaginal ring is easy to use. Once inserted, no further contraception is necessary for three weeks. Diarrhoea or vomiting will not stop it from working.

- CONS: As with any hormonal contraceptive, side effects are possible. Women using a vaginal ring have a slightly higher risk of thrombosis, heart attack and stroke.

A CONTRACEPTIVE PATCH releases a combination of oestrogen and progesterone. It is placed on the stomach or on the buttocks and is changed weekly. After three weeks, the patch is removed so that you can have your period.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: The hormones suppress ovulation and prevent sperm from entering the uterus. The patch must be applied firmly, ideally after showering. When used correctly, a contraceptive patch provides very reliable protection.

+ PROS: No need to worry about contraception on a daily basis. Diarrhoea or vomiting will not stop it from working.

- CONS: The side effects are the same as for the pill. Women using a vaginal ring have a slightly higher risk of thrombosis, heart attack and stroke. Some women find the visible patch unsightly.

BARRIER METHODS all consist of a latex or silicone cap that seals off the cervix to prevent sperm from reaching the egg. Variations include the diaphragm and the FemCap®.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: A FemCap® has to be individually fitted by a doctor. Diaphragms are available in a single size, with an additional model available in a variety of sizes. Shortly before intercourse, a woman inserts the cap into her vagina and places it in front of the cervix to prevent sperm from entering. When used correctly with spermicidal gel, barrier methods provide reliable protection. Proper instruction is essential to correct use.

+ PROS: Barrier methods are generally free of side effects. They only have to be used as needed and are cost-effective.

- CONS: A certain amount of practice and experience is necessary to ensure reliable contraception.

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING METHODS (NFP) are based on identifying the days on which a woman is fertile or infertile. They include daily monitoring of basal body temperature (BBT) and cervical mucus.

HOW IT WORKS/RELIABILITY: Because a woman's basal body temperature increases following ovulation, monitoring BBT can help to determine the infertile days that follow. The same goes for daily monitoring of cervical mucus, which becomes more liquid shortly before ovulation. Both methods require women to be very familiar with their own bodies. Accompanied by additional contraception on fertile days, NFP provides relatively reliable contraception if used properly.

+ PROS: No side effects. NFP promotes body awareness and consciousness of your own fertility.

- CONS: NFP methods require daily discipline and the use of additional contraception (such as condoms) or abstinence during fertile periods.

STERILISATION

Sterilisation is a very reliable method of contraception. In women, it involves surgery to remove, tie or cauterise the fallopian tubes. In men, it involves cutting or sealing the vas deferens. However, sterilisation requires careful thought and should not be considered until you are finished having children.

More information

For detailed information about preventing pregnancy, please see the leaflet **“Safe and Sure – Contraception for Her and Him”** (order no. 13060070).



The poster **“Verhütung im Überblick”** provides an overview of contraception (order no. 13062000).



Further material from the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) can be found in the media overview **“Sexualaufklärung und Familienplanung – Medien und Materialien”** (order no. 13010000) and online at www.sexualaufklaerung.de

A wide range of information on contraception, pregnancy and childbirth is available at www.familienplanung.de

i The booklet, poster and leaflet are available free of charge from the **Federal Centre for Health Education (Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung – BZgA)**, 50819 Cologne, Germany, or online at order@bzga.de

The morning-after pill

