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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Choosing birth control (The Basics)

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

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 need to be used every time you have sex. Other types can prevent pregnancy for long periods of time. Some types need a doctor's prescription, and others do not.

Which type of birth control should I choose?

There are many different types of birth control, and this is a personal decision. 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, if you choose to take birth control pills, you must take them every day. There are other types, like condoms, that you use only when you have sex.
- How easy it is to get – For some types of birth control, you need to see a doctor or nurse. You can get other types at the drug store, or at a health clinic like Planned Parenthood.
- How easy it is to use

- Whether it has benefits besides preventing pregnancy – For example, some types of birth control help make your periods lighter or more regular, or reduce period cramps.
 - 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 – Condoms are the only form of birth control that can reduce your chance of getting certain sexually transmitted infections ("STIs").
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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](#)). Some work better than others. But they are different in other ways, too.

The main types of birth control include:

- Permanent procedures – These make a person unable to get pregnant, or get a partner pregnant. They include tubal ligation (having your "tubes tied") and vasectomy.
- Long-acting methods – These are forms of birth control that can give you protection for years at a time. They include the IUDs and the implant.
- Hormonal birth control – These methods use hormones to prevent pregnancy. They include pills, injections, patches, and vaginal rings.
- Condoms – These are also called a "barrier" method. They prevent sperm from getting

into the uterus and reaching an egg.

- "Pericoital" methods – This refers to birth control you use at the time of sex, such as diaphragms, sponges, and spermicides. Condoms are also a type of pericoital birth control.

What about natural forms of birth control?

There are a few forms of "natural" birth control, which require no medicines or devices. They include:

- Withdrawal – This is when the male partner pulls out before ejaculating.
- Fertility awareness – This involves keeping track of your menstrual cycle so you can predict when you are most likely to get pregnant each month. Then, you can avoid sex during that time, or use some form of birth control then, such as condoms.
- Breastfeeding – Breastfeeding can decrease a person's ability to get pregnant. Some people use it as a form of birth control for the first few weeks after having a baby. But for it to work, breast milk should be the baby's only food. The medical term for using breastfeeding as birth control is "lactational amenorrhea method," or "LAM." If you want to try this method, discuss it with your doctor or nurse.

These forms of birth control are less reliable than other methods. If you feel strongly that you do not want to get pregnant, or get your partner pregnant, you might want to consider other methods instead.

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 want to switch to a different type. Your doctor or nurse can talk with you about your options.

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

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

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[Patient education: Barrier and pericoital 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"> ▪ Diaphragm ▪ Cervical cap ▪ Sponge ▪ Spermicides 	"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 creams or gel that kills sperm before it can get to an egg. It can also be used alone, but is not as effective this way.
Barrier methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Condoms (external and internal) 	Barrier methods block sperm from getting into the uterus and reaching an 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"> ▪ Shot/injection ▪ Progestin-only pill ▪ Estrogen-progestin pill ▪ Patch ▪ Vaginal ring 	These methods all use hormones to cause changes in the body that reduce the chance of pregnancy. The different options require different amounts of attention. For example, if you get the shot, you must see your doctor every 3 months. If you take pills, you must take a pill every day. If you use the patch or the ring, you must change it once a week.
Long-acting methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implantable rod ▪ Intrauterine device (IUD) with progestin ▪ IUD with copper 	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"> ▪ Vasectomy ▪ Tubal ligation (having your "tubes tied") 	These methods involve procedures or surgery and are permanent.

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