

your guide to  
**contraception**

**Helping you choose** the method  
of contraception that is best for you



# Your guide to contraception

This leaflet shows the available contraceptive methods, explains how they work, how effective they are and the main advantages and disadvantages. The figures quoted in this leaflet for how well each method works are based on extensive independent research.

Contraception needs to be used until the menopause. That is, until a woman has not had a period for two years if aged under 50, and for one year if over 50. This advice may be different for women using hormonal contraception.

## Q How do I choose which method to use?

A There are many methods of contraception to choose from and it is worth taking the time to find out more about each one so that you can choose contraception that suits you. There are two methods of contraception specifically for men – the male condom and male sterilisation – and 13 for women. You can find more detailed information about each method at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk). You can also talk through the different methods with a doctor or nurse or call the FPA helpline.

Some of the things you might want to think about are:

- whether you (or a partner) want to become pregnant fairly soon, many years away or not at all
- how you (and a partner) want contraception to suit your lifestyle
- whether you (or a partner) want to use the method every day, every time you have sex or less often.

Your answers should influence your decision about what contraception to use.

## Q Is contraception free and where can I go to get it?

A You can obtain free contraception, including emergency contraception, from:

- a general practice, unless they say they don't provide contraception services
- a contraception clinic or a sexual health clinic
- a young people's service (these will have an upper age limit)
- some genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics.

You can also get the emergency contraceptive pill Levonelle free from:

- most NHS walk-in centres (England only) and minor injuries units
- some hospital accident and emergency departments (phone first to check)
- some pharmacies (there may be an age limit).

If you are 16 or over you can buy the emergency contraceptive pill Levonelle from most pharmacies. They also sell condoms, diaphragms, caps and spermicide.

## Q How can I find a contraception service?

- A
- You can find out about all sexual health services from **sexual health direct**, the helpline run by FPA, on 0845 122 8690 or at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk).
  - You can find details of general practices and pharmacies in England at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) and in Wales at [www.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.wales.nhs.uk). In Scotland you can find details of general practices at [www.show.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk). In England and Wales you can also call NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 and in Scotland NHS 24 on 0845 4 24 24 24.

In Northern Ireland call the FPA helpline on 0845 122 8687 or for details of general practices see [www.n-i.nhs.uk](http://www.n-i.nhs.uk).

- You can get details of your nearest contraception, GUM or sexual health clinic from a telephone directory, health centre, local pharmacy, hospital, midwife, health visitor or advice centre.
- You can get details of young people's services from Brook on 0808 802 1234, [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk).

### **Q** What is emergency contraception?

**A** If you have had sex without using contraception, or think your method might have failed there are different types of emergency contraception you can use.

- The emergency contraceptive pill, Levonelle – can be taken up to three days (72 hours) after sex. It is more effective the earlier it is taken after sex. It is available with a prescription or to buy from a pharmacy.
- The emergency contraceptive pill, ellaOne – can be taken up to five days (120 hours) after sex. It is only available with a prescription.
- An emergency IUD – can be fitted up to five days after sex, or up to five days after the earliest time you could have released an egg (ovulation).

Ask your doctor or nurse about getting emergency pills in advance, just in case you need them.

### **Q** How does emergency contraception work?

**A** Emergency contraceptive pills are most likely to stop or delay ovulation (the release of an egg). They may also stop a fertilised egg settling (implanting) in the uterus. The emergency IUD may stop an egg being fertilised or implanting.

### **Q** How effective is emergency contraception?

**A** Emergency contraception can be very effective, especially if you have an IUD fitted or if the emergency contraceptive pill is taken soon after sex. However, it is not as effective as using other methods of contraception regularly and does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections.

### **Q** Can I use breastfeeding as a form of contraception?

**A** Breastfeeding is 98 per cent effective in preventing pregnancy providing:

- you are fully breastfeeding – this means you are not giving your baby any other liquid or solid food **or**
- you are nearly fully breastfeeding – this means mainly breastfeeding your baby and infrequently giving your baby other liquids **and**
- your baby is less than six months old **and**
- you have no periods.

See the FPA booklet *Your guide to contraception after you've had your baby* at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk).

### **Q** What if I become pregnant?

**A** No method of contraception is perfect. If you think you could be pregnant, do a pregnancy test as soon as possible. You can do a test from the first day of a missed period – before this time the level of pregnancy hormone, human chorionic gonadotrophin (hCG) may be too low to show up on a test and you may get a negative result even though you are pregnant. If you don't know when your next period is due, the earliest time to do a test is 21 days after unprotected sex.

If you are pregnant you need to think about what you want to do. You can choose to:

- continue with the pregnancy and keep the baby

- end the pregnancy by having an abortion
- continue with the pregnancy and have the baby adopted.

You can get further information from the FPA booklet *Pregnant and don't know what to do?* at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk).



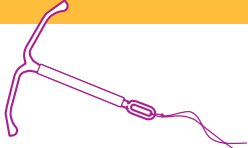
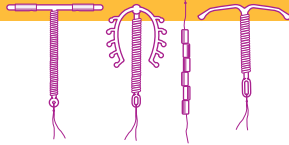




### **Sexually transmitted infections**






Most methods of contraception do not protect you from sexually transmitted infections. Male and female condoms, when used correctly and consistently, can help protect against sexually transmitted infections. If you can, avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called Nonoxinol 9 which does not protect against HIV and may even increase the risk of infection.

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# Methods with no user failure – methods that do not depend on you remembering to take or use them.

	 <p><b>Contraceptive injection</b></p>	 <p><b>Implant</b></p>	 <p><b>Intrauterine system (IUS)</b></p>	 <p><b>Intrauterine device (IUD)</b></p>	 <p><b>Female sterilisation (tubal occlusion)</b></p>	 <p><b>Male sterilisation (vasectomy)</b></p>
Effectiveness	Over 99 per cent effective. Less than four women in 1,000 will get pregnant over two years.	Over 99 per cent effective. Less than one woman in 1,000 will get pregnant over three years.	Over 99 per cent effective. Less than one woman in 100 will get pregnant over five years.	Over 99 per cent effective. Less than two women in 100 will get pregnant over five years.	The overall failure rate is about one in 200. This is a permanent method, suitable for people who are sure they never want children or do not want more children.	About one in 2,000 male sterilisations fail. This is a permanent method, suitable for people who are sure they never want children or do not want more children.
How it works	Releases the hormone progesterone which stops ovulation, thickens cervical mucus to prevent sperm reaching an egg, and thins the lining of the uterus (womb) to prevent a fertilised egg implanting.	Small flexible rod put under the skin of the upper arm. Releases the hormone progesterone. It stops ovulation, thickens cervical mucus to prevent sperm reaching an egg, and thins the lining of the uterus to prevent a fertilised egg implanting.	A small T-shaped plastic device which slowly releases the hormone progesterone is put into the uterus. It thins the lining of the uterus to prevent a fertilised egg implanting and thickens the cervical mucus which makes it difficult for sperm to meet an egg.	A small plastic and copper device is put into the uterus. It stops sperm reaching an egg, and may also stop a fertilised egg implanting in the uterus.	The fallopian tubes are cut, sealed or blocked by an operation. This stops the egg and sperm meeting.	The tubes (vas deferens) that carry sperm from the testicles to the penis are cut, sealed or tied.
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lasts for 12 weeks (Depo-Provera) or eight weeks (Noristerat).</li> <li>• You can use it if you are breastfeeding.</li> <li>• You don't have to think about contraception for as long as the injection lasts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works for three years but can be taken out sooner.</li> <li>• You don't have to think about contraception for as long as the implant is in place.</li> <li>• When the implant is removed your fertility will return to normal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works for five years but can be taken out sooner.</li> <li>• Periods usually become lighter, shorter and sometimes less painful.</li> <li>• You don't have to think about contraception for as long as the IUS is in place.</li> <li>• When the IUS is removed your fertility will return to normal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works as soon as it is put in.</li> <li>• Can stay in 5–10 years depending on type, but can be taken out at any time.</li> <li>• You don't have to think about contraception for as long as the IUD is in place.</li> <li>• When the IUD is removed your fertility will return to normal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It does not interrupt sex.</li> <li>• It cannot easily be reversed.</li> <li>• Once the operation has worked, you don't have to think about contraception.</li> <li>• Periods are unaffected.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It does not interrupt sex.</li> <li>• It cannot easily be reversed.</li> <li>• Once the operation has worked, you don't have to think about contraception.</li> <li>• Usually performed under a local anaesthetic.</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Periods may stop, be irregular or last longer.</li> <li>• Periods and fertility may take time to return after stopping the injection.</li> <li>• Some women gain weight.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Periods may stop, be irregular or last longer.</li> <li>• Acne may occur, or worsen.</li> <li>• It requires a small procedure to fit and remove it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irregular bleeding or spotting is common in the first six months.</li> <li>• Periods may stop altogether.</li> <li>• Very small chance of getting an infection during the first 20 days after insertion.</li> <li>• May get ovarian cysts.</li> <li>• Insertion can be uncomfortable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not be suitable for women at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection.</li> <li>• Periods may be heavier or longer and more painful.</li> <li>• Very small chance of getting an infection during the first 20 days after insertion.</li> <li>• Insertion can be uncomfortable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All operations carry some risk, but the risk of serious complications is low.</li> <li>• There is a small increased risk of ectopic pregnancy if female sterilisation fails.</li> <li>• You will need a general or local anaesthetic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contraception must be used until a semen test shows that no sperm are left. This can take at least eight weeks.</li> <li>• Some men may experience ongoing testicle pain but this is not common. Treatment for this is often unsuccessful.</li> </ul>
Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The injection cannot be removed from the body so any side-effects may continue for as long as it works and for some time afterwards.</li> <li>• Not affected by other medicines, diarrhoea or vomiting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put in using a local anaesthetic and no stitches are needed.</li> <li>• Tenderness, bruising and some swelling may occur.</li> <li>• You should be able to feel the implant with your fingers, but it can't be seen.</li> <li>• Some medicines may stop the implant from working.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If fitted after 45 it can stay in place until the menopause.</li> <li>• Women are taught to check the IUS is in place.</li> <li>• Can be useful for women with very heavy and/or painful periods.</li> <li>• A check for any existing infection is usually advised before an IUS is put in.</li> <li>• Not affected by other medicines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If fitted after 40 it can stay in place until the menopause.</li> <li>• Women are taught to check the IUD is in place.</li> <li>• A check for any existing infection is usually advised before an IUD is put in.</li> <li>• Not affected by other medicines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should not be chosen if in any doubt, and counselling is important.</li> <li>• You may experience discomfort or some pain for a short time after sterilisation. It is important to rest and avoid strenuous activity for a while after the procedure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should not be chosen if in any doubt, and counselling is important.</li> <li>• You may experience discomfort or some pain for a short time after sterilisation. It is important to rest and avoid strenuous activity for a while after the procedure.</li> </ul>

# Methods with user failure – methods you have to use and think about regularly or each time you have sex. **Must** be used according to instructions

 <p><b>Contraceptive vaginal ring</b></p>	 <p><b>Contraceptive patch</b></p>	 <p><b>Combined pill (COC)</b></p>	 <p><b>Progesterone-only pill (POP)</b></p>	 <p><b>Male condom</b></p>	 <p><b>Female condom</b></p>	 <p><b>Diaphragm/cap with spermicide</b></p>	 <p><b>Natural family planning</b></p>	
<p>Over 99 per cent effective if used according to instructions. Less than one woman in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p>Over 99 per cent effective if used according to instructions. Less than one woman in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p>Over 99 per cent effective if taken according to instructions. Less than one woman in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p>Over 99 per cent effective if taken according to instructions. Less than one woman in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p>98 per cent effective if used according to instructions. Two women in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p>95 per cent effective if used according to instructions. Five women in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p>Diaphragms and caps are 92–96 per cent effective when used with spermicide. Between four and eight women in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p>If used according to teaching and instructions, up to 99 per cent effective. Up to one woman in 100 will get pregnant in a year.</p>	<p><b>Effectiveness</b></p>
<p>A small, flexible, plastic ring put into the vagina releases estrogen and progesterone. It stops ovulation, thickens cervical mucus to prevent sperm reaching an egg, and thins the lining of the uterus to prevent a fertilised egg implanting.</p>	<p>A small patch stuck on the skin releases two hormones, estrogen and progesterone. It stops ovulation, thickens cervical mucus to prevent sperm reaching an egg, and thins the lining of the uterus to prevent a fertilised egg implanting.</p>	<p>Contains two hormones – estrogen and progesterone. It stops ovulation, thickens cervical mucus to prevent sperm reaching an egg and thins the lining of the uterus to prevent a fertilised egg implanting.</p>	<p>Contains the hormone progesterone, which thickens cervical mucus to prevent sperm reaching an egg and thins the lining of the uterus to prevent a fertilised egg implanting. In some cycles it stops ovulation.</p>	<p>Made of very thin latex (rubber) or polyurethane (plastic) it is put over the erect penis and stops sperm from entering the vagina.</p>	<p>A soft, thin polyurethane sheath loosely lines the vagina and covers the area just outside, and stops sperm from entering the vagina.</p>	<p>A flexible latex or silicone device, used with spermicide, is put into the vagina to cover the cervix. This stops sperm from entering the uterus and meeting an egg.</p>	<p>The fertile and infertile times of the menstrual cycle are identified by noting the different fertility indicators. This shows when you can have sex without risking pregnancy.</p>	<p><b>How it works</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You don't have to think about it every day.</li> <li>It is not affected if you vomit or have diarrhoea.</li> <li>Can make periods regular, lighter and less painful.</li> <li>May reduce the risk of cancer of the ovary, uterus and colon.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You don't have to think about it every day.</li> <li>It is not affected if you vomit or have diarrhoea.</li> <li>Periods will usually become more regular, lighter and less painful.</li> <li>May reduce the risk of cancer of the ovary, uterus and colon.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usually makes periods regular, lighter and less painful.</li> <li>Reduces risk of cancer of the ovary, uterus and colon and may protect against pelvic inflammatory disease.</li> <li>Suitable for healthy non-smokers up to the menopause.</li> <li>When you stop using the combined pill your fertility will return to normal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be used by women who cannot use estrogen.</li> <li>Can be used by women who smoke <b>and</b> are over 35.</li> <li>You can use it if you are breastfeeding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free from contraception and sexual health clinics and young people's services, and some general practices and GUM clinics, and sold widely.</li> <li>Can help protect from sexually transmitted infections.</li> <li>No serious side-effects.</li> <li>Additional spermicide is not needed or recommended.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be put in any time before sex.</li> <li>Can help protect both partners from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.</li> <li>Oil based products can be used with female condoms.</li> <li>No serious side-effects.</li> <li>Additional spermicide is not needed or recommended.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be put in any time before sex.</li> <li>You only have to use it when you have sex.</li> <li>No serious health risks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No physical side-effects.</li> <li>No chemicals or physical products are used.</li> <li>Gives a woman a greater awareness of her body.</li> <li>Can also be used to plan a pregnancy.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Advantages</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not suitable for very overweight women or smokers over 35 years.</li> <li>Low risk of serious side-effects such as blood clots, breast and cervical cancer.</li> <li>Can be temporary side effects including increased vaginal discharge, headaches, nausea, breast tenderness and mood changes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not suitable for very overweight women or smokers over 35 years.</li> <li>Low risk of serious side-effects such as blood clots, breast and cervical cancer.</li> <li>Can be temporary side-effects such as headaches, nausea, mood changes and breast tenderness.</li> <li>Possible skin reaction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not suitable for very overweight women or smokers over 35 years.</li> <li>Low risk of serious side-effects such as blood clots, breast and cervical cancer.</li> <li>Can be temporary side-effects such as headaches, nausea, mood changes and breast tenderness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Periods may stop, or be irregular, light, or more frequent.</li> <li>May be temporary side-effects such as spotty skin, breast tenderness, weight change and headaches.</li> <li>May get ovarian cysts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Putting it on can interrupt sex.</li> <li>May slip off or split if not used correctly or is the wrong size or shape.</li> <li>Man needs to withdraw as soon as he has ejaculated and before the penis goes soft, being careful not to spill any semen.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Putting it in can interrupt sex.</li> <li>Need to make sure the man's penis enters the condom and not between the vagina and the condom.</li> <li>May get pushed into the vagina.</li> <li>Not as widely available as male condoms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Putting it in can interrupt sex.</li> <li>Extra spermicide is needed if you have sex again.</li> <li>Some people can be sensitive to spermicide.</li> <li>Cystitis can be a problem for some diaphragm users.</li> <li>Can take time to learn how to use correctly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need to avoid sex or use a condom at fertile times of the cycle.</li> <li>It takes 3–6 menstrual cycles to learn effectively.</li> <li>You have to keep daily records.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Disadvantages</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women must be comfortable with inserting and removing it.</li> <li>Ring is used for three weeks out of four.</li> <li>Some medicines can make it less effective.</li> <li>Breakthrough bleeding and spotting may occur in the first few months.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May be seen.</li> <li>New patch is used each week for three weeks out of four.</li> <li>Some medicines can make it less effective.</li> <li>Breakthrough bleeding and spotting is common in the first few months.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missing pills, vomiting or severe, long-lasting diarrhoea can make it less effective.</li> <li>Some medicines can make it less effective.</li> <li>Breakthrough bleeding and spotting is common in the first few months.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It needs to be taken at the same time each day.</li> <li>Not effective if taken over three hours late (12 hours for Cerazette) or after vomiting or severe, long-lasting diarrhoea.</li> <li>Some medicines may make it less effective.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Must be put on before the penis touches the woman's genital area.</li> <li>Oil based products damage latex condoms, but can be used with polyurethane condoms.</li> <li>Available in different shapes and sizes.</li> <li>Advised to use extra lubricant when using condoms for anal sex.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use a new condom each time and follow the instructions carefully.</li> <li>Sold online and in some pharmacies and free from contraception and sexual health clinics and young people's services, and some general practices and GUM clinics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You need to use the correct size.</li> <li>You may need a different size after you have had a baby, miscarriage or abortion.</li> <li>Needs to be left in for six hours after sex.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persona is a small handheld computerised monitor with urine test sticks, which measure hormonal changes. Persona predicts the fertile and infertile times of the menstrual cycle. If used correctly it can be 94 per cent effective.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Comments</b></p>

## How FPA can help you

Call **sexual health direct**, the helpline run by FPA. It provides:

- confidential information and advice and a wide range of booklets on individual methods of contraception, common sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy choices, abortion and planning a pregnancy
- details of contraception, sexual health and genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics and sexual assault referral centres.

## FPA helplines

### England

helpline 0845 122 8690 – 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday

### Northern Ireland

helpline 0845 122 8687 – 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday

**www.fpa.org.uk** – visit for confidential information and advice or send your enquiry to Ask WES.

## A final word

This booklet can only give you basic information about contraception. The information in this booklet is based on evidence-guided research from the World Health Organization and the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance. Different people may give you different information and advice on certain points. All methods of contraception come with a Patient Information Leaflet which provides detailed information about the method. Remember – contact your doctor, practice nurse, or a contraception clinic if you are worried or unsure about anything.

A large print, audio and Braille version of *Your guide to contraception* is available. Please contact FPA.



**talking sense about sex**



Registered charity number 250187. Limited liability company registered in England, number 887632. Supported by the Department of Health.

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ISBN: 978-1-905506-96-5