

Making a decision about your pregnancy

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Family Planning

Family planning allows people to have children when they are ready to start a family. Family planning services usually include general health information, health history and physical exam as well as birth control methods or contraception. This health care improves the overall health of the individual and contributes to healthy pregnancies. Family planning services are provided by some clinics in Alaska. Agencies receiving state or federal funds for family planning offer services at reduced or no cost, depending on your income and family size. Clinics offer Food & Drug Administration approved family planning methods.

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Why is family planning important to you as an individual?

Family Planning services support people's decisions about when, or if, they would like to have children by offering education, counseling and birth control methods. Planned pregnancies spaced two or more years apart result in healthier babies and fewer medical problems for the woman. Planning for a child will help you avoid the social, health, and financial problems you face if an unplanned pregnancy happens.

There are many birth control methods and techniques available today. No one method is best for everyone at every stage of life. You can choose a birth control method to match your personal needs. It is important to think about what method will be best for you. Here are some questions you might ask yourself:

- How well does this method work to prevent pregnancy?
- How do I use it?
- Where can I get it?
- Can I afford it?
- Will my partner like this method and help me use it?
- How does this method work?
- What are the common side effects?
- What are its advantages and disadvantages?
- How long do I plan to use birth control?
- Will this method possibly affect my ability to get pregnant in the future?

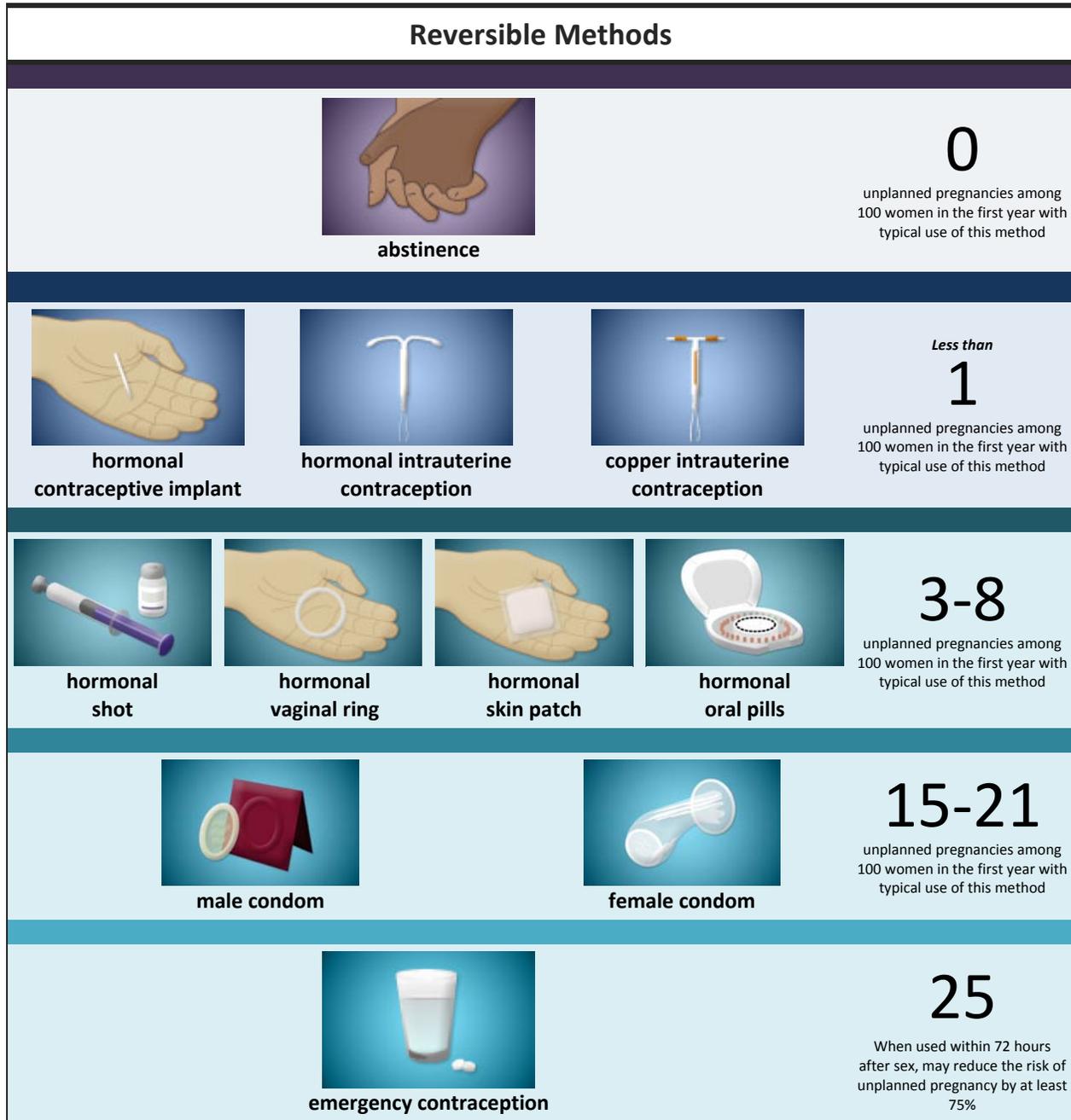
You can use this website to find information to help you start thinking about your choices. You won't find all the answers to your questions here. Before you decide on a birth control method talk with your health care provider.

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Relative Effectiveness of Birth Control Methods

This chart describes how well birth control methods work to prevent unplanned pregnancy for most people and the number of unplanned pregnancies among 100 women in the first year with typical use of each method.



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Reversible Methods (continued)



breastfeeding

Variable

depends on feeding schedule



diaphragm



sponge



fertility awareness or
cycle method



withdrawal



spermicides

16-32

unplanned pregnancies among
100 women in the first year with
typical use of this method



no method

85

unplanned pregnancies among
100 women in the first year with
typical use of this method

Permanent Methods



female sterilization



male sterilization

Less than

1

unplanned pregnancies among
100 women in the first year with
typical use of this method

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Abstinence

Abstinence means not having sex (vaginal, oral or anal). At any point in your life you may decide not to have sex. Not having sex at all is the only 100% effective way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. If you change your mind, you may want to choose another birth control method to keep from getting pregnant. The decision to have sex is your personal decision and responsibility each and every time.

Advantages of abstinence:

- Abstinence is free and available to all, at any time.
- Abstinence can encourage people to build relationships in other, non-sexual ways.
- Psychological effects might include feelings of being in control of one's life, positive self esteem.

Potential disadvantages of abstinence:

- A person may choose to use abstinence and then change his or her mind "in the heat of the moment". It is important to decide in advance what intimate activities you will say "yes" to and those you will not. Avoid high pressure sexual situations and drugs or alcohol that can affect your good judgment.
- Psychological effects could include a sense of failure or disappointment if abstinence cannot be maintained as planned.

Potential health risks:

- There are no health risks to successfully practicing abstinence.

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Contraceptive Implant

The contraceptive implant is the most effective reversible contraception available.

The contraceptive implant is one small, thin, soft vinyl rod about the same length as a matchstick. The contraceptive implant contains the progestin hormone etonogestrel which prevents the release of an egg from the woman's ovary. This hormone causes thickening of the natural mucus of the cervix and so closes the cervix making it difficult for sperm to pass. These actions prevent an egg from being fertilized by a sperm and prevent pregnancy. There may be other ways that this hormone works to prevent pregnancy that are not listed here.

The hormonal implant must be placed into the woman's upper arm by a health care provider. A numbing shot is given and then the implant is inserted. This takes less than one minute. Once inserted, the contraceptive implant remains in place and works for 3 years. Removal takes a couple of minutes and a new implant may be provided at the same time.

The contraceptive implant is very safe for nearly all women. Serious side effects are very rare. The most common change women noticed when using this birth control method is irregular spotting or not having a menstrual period.

Advantages of contraceptive implants include:

- It is the most effective reversible birth control method there is.
- Very convenient for once the implant is in place.
- Insertion and removal is quick and easy.
- One rod provides contraception for 3 years.
- It is very discreet and private.
- It is safe for women who smoker and are older than age 35.
- It is safe for women who cannot use estrogen.
- It may reduce menstrual problems for some.
- It may be inserted at any time during the menstrual cycle, but a back up method recommended unless inserted during menstrual cycle.
- Once the implant is removed most women quickly return to fertility. Women, who wish to breastfeed following birth of a baby, may get an implant beginning 6 weeks after breastfeeding is started.

Possible disadvantages and side effects include:

- There is no protection against sexually transmitted infections.
- Irregular spotting, bleeding, or no period are all possible issues for some women.
- Women can only get the implant from a health care professional.
- Women with deep vein thrombosis or blood clots need to avoid this method.
- Women who have breast cancer or a history of breast cancer need to avoid this method.
- Women with severe liver disease need to avoid this method.

Possible health risks include:

- Insertion problems, such as infection, are very rare, but possible.
- There is possible interaction with some medicines so this should be discussed with your doctor.
- Over a 2 year time period some women gained less than 5 pounds.

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- Blood clots are a possible problem, however the risk may be less than with regular birth control pills containing estrogen.

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Intrauterine Contraception

An intrauterine contraceptive is a small, plastic device that is placed into a woman's uterus by a trained health care provider. There are only two such products used in the United States, the IUD and the IUS. The intrauterine device, (IUD) contains copper. The copper slowly dissolves over a period of years and causes conditions inside the uterus sperm cannot tolerate. Thus, the sperm are unable to reach the woman's egg to fertilize it.

An IUS (intrauterine system) is a specific type of intrauterine contraceptive with progestin (synthetic progesterone) in it, which is slowly released from the device. This may sometimes stop eggs from being released from the ovaries. Progestin also causes the lining of the uterus to become thinner and it causes blocking of the cervix to keep sperm from entering. So, with either device, the primary action is to prevent fertilization. Should the primary action fail, a secondary action could occur: the changes in the uterine lining would prevent any fertilized egg from implanting and growing in the uterus.

Intrauterine contraception provides extremely effective birth control. For many women it is a safe and easy method to use.

Advantages of intrauterine contraception include:

- Longer-term birth control – 10 years for the copper IUD, 5 years for the progestin IUS. If used for the full length of time possible, this is a very cost-effective method.
- Reduced menstrual flow and cramping with the progestin IUS.
- An alternative to sterilization operation for women wanting long-term contraception.
- Positive psychological effects may include freedom from day to day concerns about pregnancy due to the high effectiveness of this method; convenience.

Possible disadvantages and side effects:

- No protection from HIV/AIDS or other STDs such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or human papilloma virus (HPV).
- Increased menstrual flow and cramping is likely with the copper device in place.
- Women who have never been pregnant may experience more discomfort during insertion of the device. Some health care providers do not want to insert IUDs in women who have never been pregnant.
- Negative psychological effects possibly encountered: Some women may have mixed feelings about using the IUD due to the controversy over its method of action.

Possible health risks with intrauterine contraception:

- Pelvic infections can result from bacteria getting into the uterus during the insertion process. However, this is uncommon. In some cases, pelvic infections may lead to infertility. Suspected infections must be thoroughly and promptly treated.
- In the rare event of a diagnosed pregnancy, the IUD should be removed. This can sometimes lead to miscarriage, but is recommended nevertheless, to reduce chances of more serious problems later in pregnancy.
- If pregnancy does occur, there may be an increased risk of tubal pregnancy, requiring prompt medical attention.
- The uterus can be perforated by the device. This is rare and is most often associated with the insertion procedure (1 per 1000 insertions).

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Progestin-only Contraceptives

Birth control methods containing only one hormone - progestin (the man-made form of progesterone) - come in many brands, doses and forms. Examples of progestin-only contraceptives are: the 3-month "shot" and "mini-pills". All progestin-only contraceptives work the same way to prevent pregnancy. They primarily work by preventing the release of an egg from the woman's ovary. They also make the cervix stay closed up tight by thickening the cervical mucus. These actions prevent an egg from being fertilized by a sperm. There may be other ways that these methods work to prevent pregnancy that are not listed here.

All the progestin-only contraceptive methods are very effective when used correctly. They are very safe to use for most women and serious side effects are very rare. A prescription from your health care provider is needed for these methods.

Advantages of progestin-only contraceptives include:

- Extremely high effectiveness and convenience for the "shot".
- Estrogen-sensitive women might be able to use these methods.
- Can be used while breast feeding.
- Reduced risk of uterine and ovarian cancer.
- Reduced menstrual periods and their sometimes painful symptoms.
- Positive psychological effects associated with high effectiveness, convenience, and relief of menstrual distress and pain have been noted.

Possible disadvantages and side effects include:

- Unpredictable bleeding or periods, especially in the first few months of use.
- Delay in return of fertility after discontinuing the "shot" (but not the mini-pill).
- No protection against HIV/AIDS or STDs, such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or human papilloma virus (HPV).
- Some women report weight gain with the "shot" (but not the mini-pill).
- Negative psychological effects of moodiness or depression have been reported.

Possible health risks include:

- Longer term users of the "shot" may develop decreased bone density.
- Negative changes in blood lipids, such as cholesterol and other "fatty" blood components.

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Combined Hormonal Methods

Birth control methods containing both estrogen and progesterone are called combined hormonal contraceptives. A prescription is needed to obtain these methods. They come in many brands, doses, and forms. Examples of the different kinds of combined hormonal birth control methods are: Birth control pills, the "patch", and the vaginal ring. They all work in the same way to prevent pregnancy:

- They suppress ovulation, that is, the woman's body does not release an egg;
- They thicken cervical mucus, which makes it more difficult for the sperm to reach the egg, should one be released, and;
- They alter the lining of the uterus so that a fertilized egg (zygote) cannot implant.

Current medical science suggests that ovulation suppression is the most important action; however, the other actions also may play a role.

All combined hormonal methods are very effective when used correctly. They are also very safe to use for most women and serious side effects are rare.

Advantages of combined hormonal contraceptives include:

- More regular and lighter menstrual periods with less cramping.
- Reduced incidence of iron-deficiency anemia.
- Long-term reduction in risk of ovarian cancer, uterine cancer, ovarian cysts, and benign breast disease.
- Fertility returns quickly after stopping these methods.
- Positive psychological effects such as freedom from worry over possible pregnancy and increased enjoyment of sexual intimacy have been reported.

Possible disadvantages and side effects of combined hormonal contraceptives include:

- Unexpected bleeding or spotting in between menstrual periods.
- Mild or temporary breast tenderness.
- No protection against HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or human papilloma virus (HPV).
- Negative psychological effects such as moodiness and decreased sex drive have been reported.

Possible health risks may include:

- Some specific health conditions may make use of combined hormonal methods unwise. Women who have cardiovascular problems like stroke, heart attack, blood clotting disorders or high blood pressure may be advised not to use these methods. Women who have certain kinds of cancer should not use combined hormonal contraceptives.
- Women who have certain types of migraines may be cautioned against using combined hormonal methods.
- Cigarette smoking increases the risk of serious cardiovascular side effects, especially for women over 35.

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Emergency Contraception

Emergency contraception (EC) is usually a pill of the hormone progestin, or of the combined hormones progestin and estrogen. These are the same hormones used in ordinary birth control pills. EC is taken after unprotected intercourse, that is, sex without using birth control. EC is the only birth control method that can prevent a pregnancy from occurring after intercourse.

Emergency contraception is not a replacement for regular birth control methods. If a woman is raped, if a condom breaks, if a couple's resolve to abstain from sex fails EC can be used to reduce the chances of a pregnancy.

EC cannot work if you are already pregnant.

EC affects the woman in several ways:

- EC may reduce the chances of getting pregnant by at least 75%, and perhaps up to 90%, if taken within 72 hours (3 days) after unprotected sex.
- by delaying the release of the egg (prevents fertilization) as demonstrated by the most current research
- by causing temporary changes in the uterine lining (stops implantation if an egg is fertilized OR stops fertilization by slowing down the sperm)
- by blocking the opening to the uterus (stops fertilization by stopping sperm's movement)

It is likely EC's primary action varies depending on what time in the menstrual cycle it is taken. It may work by a combination of these three methods at times.

EC can be taken up to 5 days after unprotected sex, but it will be less effective. It will NOT stop or harm an established pregnancy. Many brands of daily birth control pills may be used for EC, but they cause more nausea than the brands sold specifically for EC. EC is not the same as RU-486, the so-called "abortion pill".

People 17 years of age and older may purchase EC over the counter (without a prescription). People younger than 17 years of age need a prescription for EC.

Advantages of EC:

- Useful for care of victims of rape or sexual coercion after those crimes have occurred.
- Very safe.
- Provides a "second chance" to prevent pregnancy when another contraceptive failed, such as a condom breaking, missed pills, late shots, or when plans to abstain from sex were not followed.
- Available for purchase as over the counter item for people age 17 and older.
- Positive psychological effects may include relief from worry about the possibility of pregnancy, especially in situations of rape or abuse.

Potential disadvantages and side effects:

- EC may change the amount and timing of the next menstrual period.
- Some women experience nausea, temporary breast tenderness, headache or fatigue after taking EC.
- No protection from HIV/AIDS or other STDs such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or human papilloma virus (HPV).

Potential risks may include:

- There are no known health risks to EC at this time.

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Breastfeeding

A woman may become pregnant within 4 weeks of giving birth. Pregnancy can occur even before the woman has had her first period following the birth. Allowing at least two years between pregnancies gives both the mother and her babies the best chance to be strong and healthy.

Breast milk is the perfect food for the baby during the first six months of life.

A mother who breastfeeds her baby may reduce her risk for becoming pregnant for six months following birth of her baby when her baby is fed only her breast milk. Each time her baby breastfeeds hormones increase in the mother's body. These hormones help prevent an egg from being released and help the mother avoid becoming pregnant. If the baby does not breastfeed frequently there may not be enough of the hormones to prevent an egg from being released.

Mothers who rely on breastfeeding to avoid becoming pregnant must breastfeed frequently, including during the night. Pumping of breast milk or use of a baby bottle for feeding breast milk or formula, can place the mother at risk of unplanned pregnancy because there will not be enough of the hormones necessary to prevent an egg from being released.

Advantages of breastfeeding to avoid unplanned pregnancy include:

- It is healthy for the mother.
- It is healthy for the baby.
- It may be effective for up to six months following birth when the baby is fed only breast milk and no other foods or drinks.
- It is very safe.
- Does not require use of any chemicals that cause allergy for some people.

Possible disadvantages and side effects of breastfeeding include:

- Women who take medicines need to discuss the safety of breastfeeding with their doctors before breastfeeding.
- HIV infection may be passed to the baby during breastfeeding, so breastfeeding is best avoided among mothers who are HIV positive.
- Some privacy is usually necessary.
- It may be inconvenient for some mothers who need to be away from home for more than 4 hours at a time.
- As with all contraceptive methods, other than the condom, breastfeeding does not offer protection from HIV/AIDS or other STDs such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or HPV.

Possible health risks include:

- There are no known risks.

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Natural Family Planning or Fertility Awareness Methods

"Natural" family planning (NFP), fertility awareness methods (FAM), and rhythm method, are all methods that do not use any medications. There are slight differences between these three methods. It should be noted that the rhythm method, which tracks calendar dates and involves guessing when the fertile time occurs, is no longer promoted. Rhythm does not make use of the scientific advances that have occurred in identifying the signs of fertility.

"Natural" family planning (NFP) and fertility awareness methods (FAM) help identify the times during the menstrual cycle when pregnancy is most likely to occur. The fertile times are identified by checking some or all of daily body changes. Some of these are: basal body temperature (your resting temperature), cervical mucus consistency, and position of the cervix in the vagina. Once you have learned to keep track of these signs that can identify when an egg is likely to be released from the ovary (the "fertile" days), you can avoid having sex on the days around that time.

NFP or FAM can be very effective but only if the woman or couple is careful to learn the correct methods to identify and keep track of the menstrual cycle changes. Some couples use birth control methods such as barriers if they have intercourse during the "fertile" days. Other couples prefer to completely abstain from sexual intercourse on the "fertile" days.

Advantages of NFP or FAM are:

- Inexpensive and easily accessible.
- Increased awareness of the body's functioning.
- Can be used to plan and achieve a pregnancy as well as to avoid pregnancy.
- Positive psychological effects may include: couples' development of greater communication, cooperation, and shared responsibility for practicing birth control; these are acceptable methods for women and couples whose personal values conflict with other methods of birth control.

Possible disadvantages and side effects:

- Learning to use NFP or FAM takes time and practice. Classes are sometimes available in the community or from other users.
- Continued use takes commitment, calculation, planning and cooperation between a woman and her partner.
- There is no protection from HIV/AIDS or STDs such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or human papilloma virus (HPV).
- These methods are less reliable in women with irregular periods or who are breastfeeding.
- Increased abstinence may be required during certain times.
- Negative psychological effects may include a sense of disappointment or guilt if abstinence is not practiced during "fertile" times as intended.

Possible health risks:

- There are no health risks to successful use of these methods.

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Barrier Methods

Barrier contraceptive methods all work by blocking the entrance to the uterus so an egg cannot unite with a sperm. All barrier methods work well if used correctly and consistently, but the user must take the initiative to use the method each time she or he has sex.

Barrier methods are extremely safe for the user, having few or no serious side effects. Two barrier methods that women can wear internally require a prescription to obtain. These are the diaphragm and the cervical cap.

Most other barrier methods are available for purchase without a prescription at a drugstore, grocery store, or health clinic. These include: male condom, female condom, spermicidal foam or film, spermicidal gel or cream.

Advantages of barrier methods include:

- Nothing enters the bloodstream to affect the whole body or the woman's periods.
- Barriers need only be used when sexual intercourse occurs; there is no daily "maintenance" routine or schedule.
- Male and female condoms decrease the risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease.
- Psychological effects include positive feelings of not using a medication that affects your entire body; confidence associated with being in personal control of contraceptive use.

Possible disadvantages and side effects include:

- Barriers are effective only with consistent and correct use; some people have difficulty learning to insert or place the barriers.
- The diaphragm and cervical cap provide no protection against HIV/AIDS or STDs; spermicides can cause irritation of the skin making the user more likely to get an infection if exposed.
- Allergic reactions can occur, particularly to latex (in diaphragms, caps, and some types of condoms) or to spermicides.
- Negative psychological effects such as embarrassment when purchasing barriers, frustration when barriers cause delay of sexual relations, or loss of sexual spontaneity, have been reported.

Possible health risks include:

- Increased risk of toxic shock syndrome among cervical cap users if the cap is improperly used.
- Other barrier methods pose no serious health risks.

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Withdrawal

Withdrawal may be effective in preventing pregnancy. Withdrawal works by keeping the sperm apart from the egg. This is accomplished when the man withdraws his penis from the woman's vagina before having an orgasm. During orgasm the sperm are released in the fluid coming from the man's penis. If any of the fluid is released into the vagina or the woman's genital area, there may be risk of pregnancy.

Advantages of withdrawal to avoid unplanned pregnancy include:

- It is very safe.
- There is no cost.
- No hormones are needed.
- No chemicals are needed.

Possible disadvantages and side effects of withdrawal include:

- Withdrawal requires skill and may be difficult for some couples.
- Withdrawal offers no protection from HIV/AIDS or other STDs such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or HPV.

Possible health risks include:

- There are no known risks.

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No Method

When no method is used, the risk of an unplanned pregnancy is very high. It is expected that for every 100 sexually active women who are not using a method 85 will become pregnant within one year. Women who plan their pregnancies have a better opportunity to be in control of their health and provide for a healthy pregnancy by eating well and avoiding alcohol, tobacco and drugs.

Advantages of not using any method to avoid unplanned pregnancy include:

- There are no advantages and the risk is great.

Possible disadvantages and side effects of not using a method include:

- Dealing with many life altering consequences of an unplanned pregnancy.
- No protection from HIV/AIDS or other STDs such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, warts, hepatitis, or HPV.

Possible health risks include:

- The health risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth vary from person to person.

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Sterilization

Sterilization is a permanent method of birth control for men or women. Because sterilization is permanent, you will want to be absolutely sure you don't ever want to have a child, or any more children, before you take this step. Sterilization is done as an out-patient procedure.

For men, the tubes that allow sperm to pass out of the penis are closed off so that sperm may not come into contact with an egg. Male sterilization or vasectomy, may be performed without use of a needle or a scalpel.

For women, the tubes that carry the egg to the uterus are blocked by a surgical procedure or a microinsert. The microinsert looks like a very tiny metal spring and is placed inside the woman's fallopian tubes.

Following sterilization, sperm and eggs are still created but fertilization cannot occur because the pathways that usually allow the sperm and egg to come together are blocked. Back up contraception may be necessary for a period of time after either procedure.

Advantages of sterilization include:

- Permanent birth control that doesn't require any hormones or daily maintenance.
- Normal functions of reproductive organs aren't changed by sterilization; a man still has erections and normal ejaculations (but without sperm carried in the fluid); a woman still has her menstrual cycle as always.
- Over a period of years, sterilization is very cost-effective.
- Positive psychological effects may include: Relief from worry about pregnancy; freedom to enjoy sexual relations more spontaneously.

Possible disadvantages and side effects may include:

- Expense of the surgery if you do not have insurance or assistance to help pay for it.
- If you change your mind, the so-called "reversal" procedures are usually not covered by insurance and may not be successful or even possible.
- Negative psychological effects may include the emotional distress of regret (especially when the decision has been made too quickly, when there are mixed feelings about the procedure that weren't addressed beforehand, or when circumstances change, as in divorce and remarriage).

Potential risks may include:

- Any procedure poses a small risk of problems with anesthetics, allergic reaction to medications, bleeding or infection.