

Teens, Sex, and Contraception

Many teenagers are curious about sex but do not know the facts. Movies, television, magazines, even the Internet portray sex as fun, exciting, and adult, but rarely mention the consequences: unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (STD). Nearly 1 million teenagers become pregnant every year in the United States; most don't intend for it to happen. About 3 million teens get an STD every year. Proper use of contraception and latex condoms can help prevent these consequences.

The most effective way to avoid getting pregnant or infected with an STD is to not have sex (abstinence). If you choose to have sex, however, you should use an effective method of birth control and protect yourself against STD infection by using a latex condom.

Choosing the Right Birth Control

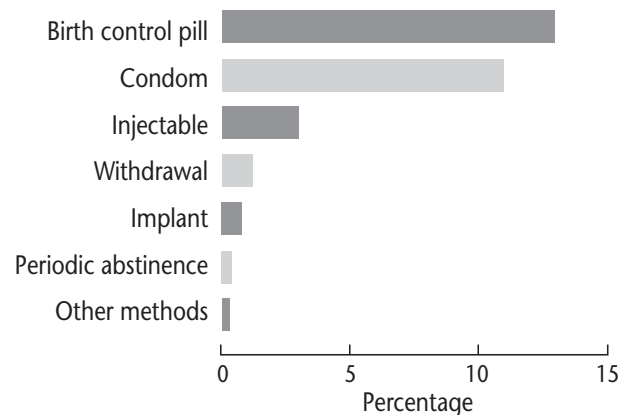
Oral contraceptives (the pill) and condoms are the methods that most sexually active teens use (see figure). Injectable contraception is the next most popular. Some methods of birth control also have noncontraceptive benefits that are especially important to teens, such as clearing up acne or making menstrual periods less painful (fewer cramps) and more regular. Whatever method a teen chooses, it should be used correctly and consistently — every time he or she has sex. Even if teens use a hormonal method, latex condom use is essential to decrease the risk of STDs.

Common Methods Teens Might Choose

- **Birth control pill:** Oral contraceptives are an effective method for preventing pregnancy. Correct use requires that a pill be taken every day. Pill use also offers a number of health benefits. Teenagers and women who take the pill usually have less pain and fewer cramps with their periods. Most users also have lighter periods that last fewer days and occur more regularly. In addition, most teens find that their acne improves when using oral contraceptives. Most women who take the pill do not experience a change in weight. Birth control pills require a visit to a clinician and a prescription.
- **Male condom:** Condoms are less effective than many other methods at preventing pregnancy. However, male latex condoms are the only method that has been shown to help prevent all types of STDs. Used correctly and at every act of intercourse, they provide the best protection currently available against infection. If your partner refuses to use a male latex condom, you may wish to use a female condom to help protect yourself or say “no” to sex. Male and female condoms are available over the counter in drugstores, supermarkets, and convenience stores. You do not need to see a clinician or talk to a pharmacist to get condoms.

What Birth Control Methods Do Teens Use?

Percentage of Female Teens Using Various
Contraceptive Methods



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997.

- **Injectable:** Birth control shots are highly effective at preventing pregnancy. The main side effects with the 3-month shot are menstrual changes (which can include irregular cycles, bleeding between periods, and, occasionally, heavier bleeding) and weight gain. Another change over time may be no bleeding at all.
The once-a-month birth control shot has effects similar to oral contraceptive pills. The monthly shot is more likely to cause regular, lighter periods. Injectables require a visit to a clinician's office once every 28 days or 3 months to get another shot.
- **Barrier methods:** In addition to male and female condoms, barrier methods include the diaphragm, the cervical cap, and spermicides. Barrier methods must be used correctly during every act of intercourse. On average, these methods are the least effective forms of birth control—all have typical-use failure rates of about 20% or higher. Diaphragms and cervical caps require fitting by a clinician and a prescription. Barrier methods have few side effects, although some people may be allergic to latex or spermicides.
- **Emergency contraception:** Emergency contraception is an option if you've forgotten to use your birth control method or if a method fails (for example, if a condom breaks). It can also be used after forced sex (if you've been assaulted). Although emergency contraception is often called the "morning after" pill, it actually can be used several days after sex, not just the next morning. The most common side effects are nausea and vomiting. Call your clinician to discuss emergency contraception as soon as possible after unprotected intercourse.
- **New methods:** Two new hormonal birth control methods—a vaginal ring and a skin patch—were recently approved by the Food and Drug Administration and may soon be available. With the ring, a woman inserts the round, flexible device into her vagina and leaves it in place for 3 weeks. She then removes the ring for 1 week and gets her period. She inserts a new ring at the end of this week. With the patch, a woman applies one matchbook-sized patch to her abdomen, arm, or buttock each week for 3 weeks, then gets her period during a patch-free week. Both the vaginal ring and patch are very effective at preventing pregnancy and may improve menstrual regularity much like the pill. When available, both methods will require a visit to a clinician and a prescription.

Speak with Your Clinician

Each type of birth control has advantages and disadvantages. If you're a sexually active teen, speak with your clinician. He or she can help you decide which method is best for you.

For More Information

The following Web sites address issues in sexuality and reproductive health relevant to teens.

ARHP Patient Education Site

<http://www.arhp.org/arhpframepated.htm>

This patient-oriented site from the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals includes online brochures and information. Two interactive programs on the site can help you test your "contraception IQ" and choose the right birth control method.

Center for Young Women's Health

<http://www.youngwomenshealth.org>

Sponsored by Children's Hospital in Boston, this site provides information about health issues that affect teenage girls and young women.

Emergency Contraception Site

<http://www.not-2-late.com>

Operated by Princeton University, this site provides accurate information about emergency contraception (the "morning after" pill) and a directory of clinicians who provide it.

It's Your (Sex) Life

<http://www.itsyoursexlife.com>

This site provides sexual health information for young adults. The information also is useful for parents wanting to address these issues with their teenagers.

Sex, Etc.

<http://www.sxetc.org>

This online teen newsletter examines love, sex, relationships, and health.

Teenwire

<http://www.teenwire.com>

This teen site from Planned Parenthood® Federation of America provides information and news about teen sexuality, sexual health, and relationships.