



Contraception – from ‘no’ to the morning after

Not many weeks seem to go by without new statistics frightening us all into believing that the UK female population is an abortion-happy, contraception-illiterate group of people, happy to bury our heads in the sand rather than think about how best to prevent unplanned pregnancies.

Indeed, the figures make for quite sobering reading, especially for parents of teenage girls. The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe, and in the developed world we are second only to the United States when it comes to the number of teens getting pregnant. ¹

The problem of unplanned pregnancy doesn't stop when you hit 20 though. Almost half of all abortions that take place are carried out on women in their twenties, and there are more abortions carried out on over 35s than there are on under 18s (although these are not necessarily just for unplanned pregnancies.)

Why is contraception such a taboo subject?

It seems that we're happy to have sex, often with someone we hardly know – but although we're quite ready to get naked with them, bringing up the subject of contraception in a new relationship is considered to be embarrassing. A new man may well assume that you're already on the pill (and that you won't insist on a condom, even though you should) and women still feel it's somehow 'tarty' to carry a condom, and leave it up to the man.

Think about it – if you believe it's embarrassing to bring up the subject of condoms when you're about to have sex with a new man, just imagine how much more embarrassed you'll be if you find yourself with a sexually transmitted disease and have to make that phone call...

There's absolutely nothing embarrassing about being responsible.

A sex life beyond the pill or condoms?

According to statistics² women prefer to pop the pill over and above any other method of contraception. It's free, it's easy, and if you have a good memory, it's very reliable – around 99% effective if you use it properly.

Some women can't take the combined contraceptive pill, and switch to the progestogen only pill, which may lead to problems if time keeping isn't your forte.

The combined pill usually has a window of 12 hours, so a lie-in doesn't mean that you're not protected, and time differences when you're travelling aren't usually an issue. However, the progestogen only pill is more strict, some brands often have a window of three hours or less, and should ideally be taken at the same time every day. Always check the rules for your brand, as they are all different.

Other reasons for pill failure include being sick or having an upset tummy after taking it, which can stop the hormones being absorbed. Also some women don't know that taking antibiotics can lead to the pill not being as effective.

Condoms are easy to use, and used by around 24% of couples³— but surprisingly not always used properly. And, let's face it, they do get in the way and they aren't exactly romantic. It's easy to jettison the rubber and throw caution to the wind once you're in a long term relationship, but you shouldn't just go contraceptive-less or you could end up with more to worry about than whether you have enough of them left for the weekend...

What else is there?

Believe it or not, your options are not just limited to these two favourites. Contraception can broadly be split into three categories:

- Hormonal
- Barrier
- Natural

The range of hormonal options goes from short term options like the pill, to long term and reversible types like the intrauterine system (IUS) or contraceptive injection.

Barrier contraceptives include male and female condoms, and the diaphragm.

Natural methods can be hard work, rely on constant monitoring of your cycle and physical signs of ovulation, and should only be considered by women in long term stable relationships as a slight miscalculation can lead to a very big 'oops'.

Have you thought about....?

Long term reversible contraception is gaining in popularity, probably because women don't really want to have to think about contraception every day, and want to be able to just get on with their lives without remembering a pill or condoms. This type of contraception is almost as popular as the male condom, as it's being used by around 23% of us³.

The contraceptive injection, like most long term contraception is hormonal. It's around 99% effective, like the combined pill, and suits most women although it can have some side effects. In some women it can completely stop periods, you normally

only need to have the jab every three months or so, and your GP will send you a reminder before you're due.

If you prefer term hormonal contraception, have you considered contraceptive patches? These work in the same way as the contraceptive pill and deliver a dose of hormones through your skin to stop you getting pregnant. All you have to remember is to change your patch every week. It's also around 99% effective although possibly having a sticking plaster on your bottom isn't very glamorous...

Natural methods are also becoming more mainstream, and can work if you're in a committed relationship and want to come off the pill for something a bit more holistic. If you follow the rules and are meticulous about taking temperatures and recording every detail of your cycle, you could practice natural contraception. It works by predicting the times in your cycle when you're most likely to be fertile – and you just have to avoid sex, or use another method, on those days. Fertility monitoring kits are available from pharmacies.

Where can I get contraceptive advice?

If you feel like a change, or are simply confused about which option is the best for you, there are dedicated 'family planning' clinics in most areas that you can ask for help with any aspect of sexual health. To find your nearest sexual health clinic, just visit the NHS Direct website and type in your postcode. You could also visit the 'Advice for Life' website at www.contraception.co.uk which contains details of all of your contraceptive choices.

Alternatively, most GP practices now have their own sexual health/contraception advice services. Most nurses are only too happy to sit down and discuss your contraceptive options with you, and help you find the right way to avoid becoming an unplanned pregnancy statistic, whatever your age or relationship status.

Summary

- The UK has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in Europe
- There are more abortions in over 35s than under 18s, and the highest rate is in women in their twenties
- The pill is the most popular method, followed by male condoms and long term reversible contraception.
- You can get advice on the best contraception for you from a trained sexual health nurse at a dedicated clinic

References

1. A League Table of Teenage Births in Rich Nations, UNICEF, July 2001
2. [http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/contraception/nhs-contraceptive-services-england:-2007-08-\[ns\]](http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/contraception/nhs-contraceptive-services-england:-2007-08-[ns])

3. <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/webfiles/publications/Contraception0708/NHS%20Contraceptive%20Services%20England%202007-08.pdf>

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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