

Birth Control Options: A Comprehensive Review

When it comes to birth control, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. With a wide range of options available—from daily pills and hormonal implants to non-hormonal methods and permanent procedures—understanding what's out there can feel overwhelming.

Each method comes with its own benefits, side effects, and considerations, and the right choice often depends on your health, lifestyle, and future family plans. In this article, Erika Beatriz Garcia, MD, an obstetrician and family medicine physician at Salinas Valley Health Taylor Farms Family Health & Wellness Center, shares helpful information about the most common birth control options to help you make an informed decision that aligns with your personal needs and goals.

Birth Control Pills

Birth control pills come in two main types: progestin-only pills and combined oral contraceptives, which contain both estrogen and progestin. These hormonal methods primarily work by preventing ovulation—the release of an egg—thereby significantly reducing the chance of pregnancy.

“Birth control pills are very effective. They work about ninety-three percent of the time if taken the right way. But, it's important to remember that neither birth control pills nor any other kind of non-permanent birth control method works one-hundred percent of the time,” cautions Dr. Garcia.

‘Plan B’ is an emergency contraceptive pill meant for use after unprotected sex or contraceptive failure, such as a broken condom. It should be taken as soon as possible, ideally within 72 hours, and is available without a prescription. Another option, Ella, is more effective in some cases—especially for individuals who are overweight or obese—and can be taken up to five days after unprotected intercourse.

IUDs: A Highly Effective Choice

IUDs are among the most effective forms of birth control. They are placed inside the uterus by a healthcare provider and come in two types: hormonal and non-hormonal (copper). Hormonal IUDs can prevent pregnancy for three to eight years, while copper IUDs can last up to ten years. Each type may affect menstrual bleeding differently, so discussing your preferences with a doctor is important. IUDs are over 99% effective and are typically removed in a medical office when no longer needed.

“The removal is a simple procedure in most cases,” assures Dr. Garcia. “Some patients become concerned because historically there were instances where the IUD would migrate and end up outside of the uterus and sometimes require surgery to get removed. That's not as common today, yet it's still a risk. So, it's important that you talk to your doctor about your concerns or anything you've heard about this type of birth control that makes you think you need to know more.”

Birth Control Patch: Convenient, Discreet

The birth control patch is a convenient, discreet option that delivers hormones through the skin. It's a small, neutral-colored, peel-and-stick patch—about one-inch square—that can be placed on areas like the lower back, upper buttocks, or back of the arm. It's easy to use and often goes unnoticed.

“It works about as well as the pill. But, unlike the pill which has to be taken daily, the patch needs to be discarded and replaced once a week. It's much more convenient,” notes Dr. Garcia.

Vaginal Ring and Diaphragms

The vaginal ring is a flexible, ring-shaped form of birth control that's inserted into the vagina, where it slowly releases hormones through the vaginal wall. It's worn for three weeks, followed by a one-week break when menstruation typically occurs. The ring is easy to use and highly effective.

"It is going to have some side effects where it may not be the best for people who are lactating and still trying to breastfeed or establish their milk supply, and then also people who don't like changes in their vaginal secretions whenever they have something in the vagina like the ring or other medications. I might say this isn't the right option for them," advises Dr. Garcia.

Diaphragms, like the vaginal ring, may not be ideal for users uncomfortable with inserting or removing something from the vagina. They must be used with spermicide, which can cause vaginal irritation for some people. Additionally, diaphragms are less effective at preventing pregnancy compared to other methods discussed here.

Male and Female Condoms: An Important STI Consideration

Condoms vary in effectiveness depending on the type and how they're used. Female (internal) condoms, which are placed inside the vagina, are about 79% effective. External condoms, which go over the penis, are more common and offer about 87% effectiveness in preventing pregnancy.

"What's really important about condoms is that they're the only ones that are going to help reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections. Even if you're on something else for pregnancy prevention, or maybe you're on one of these other methods because you want to change how heavy your periods are, condoms are still something individuals need to be considering if they're trying to avoid sexually transmitted infections."

The "Shot": New Option for Patients

The birth control shot is a convenient option that requires only one injection every three months for effective pregnancy prevention. Recently, a subcutaneous version was approved in the U.S., allowing users to self-administer it at home—similar to how insulin or certain weight loss medications are injected.

"It's that simple. Right now, the FDA approval is for them to come into the office and self-inject in a healthcare provider setting," explains Dr. Garcia.

What About Simply Spermicide?

Vaginal spermicide works by killing sperm but is only about 70% effective when used alone. It can be a helpful secondary method when paired with other forms of birth control, like condoms, which it's safe to use with. However, spermicides may cause vaginal irritation and can increase the risk of HIV transmission, as noted on product labels.

"If your partner has an unknown status, this is a great time to think about getting tested before starting to rely on this method," suggests Dr. Garcia.

Permanent Birth Control Options

Tubal ligation (for females) and vasectomy (for males) are considered permanent forms of birth control. While reversal is technically possible, it's not guaranteed—especially if the procedure involved removing the entire fallopian tube. In such cases, options like IVF or surrogacy may be needed to achieve pregnancy. Vasectomy reversal is also possible but can be costly and may not be covered by insurance, depending on the state and plan.

“I just want to remind people that when you're making decisions about your future fertility, you're making it for someone you don't know yet. We don't know who we're going to be in ten years. Make sure you're giving yourself the time you need to think through as much as you can what your futures might look like,” urges Dr. Garcia. “If all of those possibilities are ones where you think you would not want to become pregnant or father children, we will definitely get you to somebody who can get it done.”

Age-Related Concerns Surrounding Birth Control

While age can play a role in choosing birth control, a person's overall health and risk factors are more important considerations. Dr. Garcia explains that doctors use the U.S. Medical Eligibility Criteria to guide recommendations based on individual health conditions—such as recent childbirth or a history of breast cancer—rather than just age alone.

“Those are the kinds of historical bits of information about your life we want to know to make sure we're offering you something that's safe and effective for you. People have different goals. For example, if your goal was to try to regulate your cycles, this information is not meant to rank these medications based on how well they do that. Please be open to talking to your doctor about your specific goals,” she urges.

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