Birth Control Basics

Choose what's right for you.

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Today, all women are free to choose contraceptives to stop pregnancy in the long or short term or just to regulate and control their menstrual cycles. But a pill that makes your friend have lighter periods and clearer skin may leave you feeling moody and bloated, cautions Kecia Gaither, MD, an ob-gyn based in New York City, so consult with your doctor before opting for one of the methods below.

IUDs The Food and Drug Administration has approved two different kinds of intrauterine devices (IUDs): hormonal and non-hormonal. Both are effective for several years. The non-hormonal IUD uses copper to prevent conception.

Implants These tiny, thin rods are about the size of a matchstick and are inserted under the skin of a woman's upper arm. Implants release progestin to prevent pregnancy, and its effects last for up to four years. A doctor can easily remove an implant to restore a woman's fertility.

The Shot Often called the Depo Shot, Depo-Provera is an injection women get from a nurse or doctor every three months. The shot uses progestin to ensure that a woman doesn't conceive.

Vaginal Ring This small flexible ring contains estrogen and progestin to stop ovulation and prevent pregnancy.

The Patch Women prevent pregnancy with this adhesive that contains estrogen and progestin; it's worn on the upper arm, stomach, butt or back every week for three weeks.

The Pill Oral contraceptive options include combination pills (containing estrogen and progestin), progestin-only pills and extended-cycle pills with progestin and estrogen that allow women to have just one period every three months, or even eliminate menstruation.

Emergency Contraception These pills work when taken within 72 to 120 hours of sex without any contraceptive. In addition, doctors can insert a copper T IUD into a woman's uterus five to seven days after she has engaged in sex without birth control.

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