



It's your choice

Finding a birth control method that you are comfortable with can be a frustrating experience. **Angelique Ruzicka** considers conventional methods, and explores some new options available to women

When I got engaged I looked around to see if I could find something different – a sapphire, a ruby, an emerald – anything other than a boring old diamond. I felt that everyone chose a diamond ring, but in the end that's exactly what I chose. Why? Because it was simple, classy, and above all it worked for me.

If you ask your friends, mother, or even your colleagues about what they use as contraception the chances are they were advised to go on the Pill, and many have stayed with it for years. Why? Again because it's simple, and it works for them.

The Pill is a popular option for women, but how many of them hunted around like I did for my ring?

Have you ever considered that the method you are using may not be the right option for you? Sometimes it's immediately obvious when things aren't working, like it was for Natalie du Preez who was put on Triphasil by her doctor. "I found it horrible as my mood swings would be really bad. I felt aggro all the time; I picked up weight – never mind the pain of remembering to take it every day."

But for Debbie Parker, who is in a long-term relationship, the Pill is her preferred choice. "It's the Pill all the way. Condoms are great, but they are a pain. Halfway through all that fumbling you have to put them on. It's just a mood killer," she says.

If you've not considered all the options, or if you have been on one form of contraception for years, it might be time for a birth control make-over.

The Pill

Time magazine called the Pill "so small, so powerful, and so misunderstood" and it's easy to understand why. When it came onto the market in 1961 it liberated women everywhere. It's tiny, so it's discreet, and it's powerful because it has given women the freedom to not only decide when to fall pregnant, but to choose when they want their period.

Oral contraceptives (OCs) are among the most common reversible methods of contraception. "OCs are highly effective, easy to use and have few side effects," says gynaecologist Dr Alan Alperstein. "Once a woman discontinues use, fertility is resumed quickly. OCs can be taken for long periods of time, and are commonly used up to the menopause."

But the Pill has received a lot of bad press too – some of it unjustified. "There are misconceptions around the risks of cancer and weight gain," Dr Alperstein says.

The Pill does have several downsides though. It does not protect you against sexually transmitted diseases. Other side effects include nausea, breast pain and breakthrough bleeding.

Injection

Having an injection every two or three months instead of taking a pill means that you don't have to worry if you forget to take your medication. "It has a lot of benefits," comments Dr Alperstein. "It is for the young professional who wants a clean, tidy, non-fussy method."

But the injection is not for everyone. After rejecting the Pill Du Preez said she tried Nur-Isterate. "I tried the two-month injection, but never again. For some it works differently, but when I was on it, I came onto my period for five days, off for three, on for five, and so it continued for a whole two months. I just use condoms now. It's safer all round and not just for contraception."

There are more downsides too. If you're worried about your weight you should know that 50 percent of women gain weight on Depo-Provera, which is a progestin-only drug that is injected every three months. Also, if you want to fall pregnant quickly it takes on average six months after you stop with the injections to conceive.

Natural

The natural, or rhythm, method is highly risky but it's probably the cheapest pregnancy preventer other than abstinence. Doctors are hesitant in recommending this method, but they do say it's safer if you have a perfectly regular cycle. "It needs to be predictable and if you use this method you need to be in the frame of mind that if you do fall pregnant it's not a huge problem," says Dr Philip Zinn, an obstetrician and gynaecologist. If you have a regular cycle, then the most risky time to have sex is around the time of ovulation (when the egg is released). This usually takes place 14 days before the period. So on a 28-day cycle, for example, the highest risk is around day 14, and on a 30-day cycle it's day 16. "Avoid making love or use condoms between day seven and day 18 of your 28-day cycle and you will be safe most of the time," adds Dr Zinn.

IUDs and IUS

You may be familiar with a Copper T, also known as an intrauterine device (IUD), which is inserted in the uterus. But you may not have heard of another option called the intrauterine system (IUS), better known as the Mirena.

There are major differences between the copper IUD and the IUS. A copper IUD is a plastic device with copper coiled around the shaft, which acts by causing a "foreign body" response in the uterus creating a hostile environment for pregnancy. The copper is also spermicidal (kills sperm). It has no hormonal effect so the cycle is normal, but periods may be heavier.

A Mirena does the same in the uterus but has additional strategies in preventing pregnancy. The Mirena hormone keeps the endometrium (the lining of the uterus) too thin for an embryo to implant. This is how it prevents pregnancy, but this also gives you a very light period – or even no period at all. "Another way it prevents pregnancy is by making the cervical mucus impenetrable to sperm," says Dr Zinn.

A safe insertion of an IUD should ensure a low risk of infection. "These long-acting methods are effective options. With IUDs, proper insertion technique and absence of infection at the time of insertion are important considerations," says Dr Alperstein.

The cost of inserting an IUD or IUS is quite expensive. The Mirena, for example, is just under R2 000, but then you have to pay a doctor to have it fitted and that can be anything from R500 to R1 700. The benefits, however, could outweigh the cost, especially if you suffer from heavy periods. "The IUS keeps the lining of the uterus thin and that means you have no period or it's very light," adds Dr Zinn.

Another alternative is the NuvaRing. It is not in the country yet but it should be out early next year. It's a flexible, plastic and

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translucent device that is inserted into the vagina for three weeks at a time, and then removed for a week when your period comes. After that, you insert a new one. It's comfortable, convenient and discreet. It avoids some of the side effects of the contraceptive pill. "However it works in the same way as the pill by shutting down your cycle to prevent ovulation," says Dr Zinn.

Implants

The Implanon, or subdermal implant, is scheduled to come into South Africa in 2011. It's very convenient and can be left in the body for three years. While an IUS or an IUD is inserted in the uterus, the Implanon is inserted under the skin of the arm.

It also releases a progestogenic hormone, and some women suffer side effects from this. "It works by stopping ovulation but could cause unpredictable periods in some women. This is because of an unpredictable effect of the hormone on the lining of the uterus," says Dr Zinn.

Condoms

This method reduces the probability of pregnancy and the spread of STDs. Mostly they are made from latex, but some are made from other materials. The female condom, for example, is made out of polyurethane. The female condom is a pouch with flexible rings at each end. The ring inside the pouch must be inserted deep into your vagina, while the penis must be put through the pouch on the other end.

Condoms are one of the safest methods, but they can kill the mood as they are fiddly and can take time to insert in the vagina or cover the penis if you are a novice. Make sex more fun by choosing different kinds of condoms, such as the ribbed Durex's Pleasuremax. Alternatively, Durex has condoms in various flavours including strawberry, banana, mint and kiwi. You may also consider using lubricants, which not only make sex easier, but can provide you with all manner of titillating sensations and tastes.

There are many contraceptive methods out there and you are bound to find the right one for you. You may just have to try several before choosing one you like the most. "Women want perfect contraception with no side effects. You want to be able to smile, look at him sensually, and do what you want to do, and repeat without the worry," adds Dr Alperstein.

Ultimately, the best contraception method is the one that lets you have your way with your man, gives you the least amount of discomfort, is cost effective, fits in with your lifestyle, and protects you against STDs and pregnancy. There is a smorgasbord of options out there, but the choice is yours. ☺