

SERVIZIO SANITARIO REGIONALE  
EMILIA-ROMAGNA

 Regione Emilia-Romagna

# CONTRACEPTION



CONOSCERE PER SCEGLIERE

*«Contraception. Knowledge: the key to making the right choice».*  
The title of this booklet is reminiscent of one of the main aims of the men and women working for the regional Health Service: that of building up a correct, respectful relationship with the people who turn to them. In fact, it is essential that our regional Health Service guarantee all the people living in Emilia-Romagna suitable health services providing protection care and recovery of their health. However, it is equally important that the people who live in our region be sufficiently well informed in order to be able to make conscious choices regarding their health and the services offered. For this to happen, the men and women working for the Health Service must be able to provide information and explanations as well as listen and advise.

*In this case, we are speaking in particular to foreign women living in our region to provide them with the information they need to be able to choose, if they want, a method of contraception. In doing this, we want to make a contribution so that a pregnancy is a joyful occasion, and also ensure that with a correct use of contraception, fewer and fewer women will opt for a voluntary termination of pregnancy, a choice we know is always painful and difficult.*

*This booklet provides basic information. To clarify doubts and problems, to receive concrete advice, women and couples can contact the Consultori Familiari present in every town in our region as well as the Spazi per le donne immigrate ed i loro bambini. They will find services and people willing to listen to them.*

**Giovanni Bissoni**

Health policy officer, Emilia-Romagna Regional Council





## WHY PRACTISE BIRTH CONTROL

Sexuality is a natural, vital component of each one of us. It is important for everyone to live a sex life that satisfies, gives pleasure, allows an exchange of affection and love, that is founded on mutual respect. Besides being necessary for the survival of the human race, and therefore of reproduction, sexuality is also a special, intimate means with which to enter into a relationship with another person. Precisely because sexuality expresses a vital need for affection, there are moments or phases in our life in which we desire to live it to the full for its value as an exchange between people and not for its reproductive implications. For this reason, it is necessary to be familiar with methods of contraception so as to be able to choose freely first of all whether to use them, and secondly which ones to use because they are more suited to our own personal needs. With the term «contraception» we mean the possibility of avoiding that an intercourse is followed by a pregnancy. So it becomes a means with which to link the conception of a child to the possibility of welcoming it with love after it is born. A woman or a couple can have many reasons for wanting to avoid a pregnancy. We shall present some of these reasons, telling the stories of foreign women who have arrived in our midst in Emilia-Romagna. Gifty, Olena, Fatima recently arrived in Italy. Of the three, one or more of them plan to stay here just a few years while someone else wants to stay longer. Belen, Asuncion and Joyce came to Italy with the help of their whole families to look for a job and save money to give a hand to their relatives at home. Once they have saved the amount needed, at least one of them wants to go back home and another of them who is not married plans to find herself a husband when she returns to her country. Aicha, Kira, Valdete, Imam followed their husbands but once they arrived in Italy, they soon realised how hard life can be for emigrants. They became aware that in a foreign country, the family cannot count on so many children or at least that it is necessary to wait between one birth and the next. There are no relatives to help with the burden of housework and their children's education. Life in a foreign country is sometimes very different from the one people knew when they were children. Whilst being a help, school, in any case, requires commitment and work on the part of a mother. Valbona, Edoukou, Melika. Luan came to Italy because they wanted to make a future for themselves. Here women, at least according to what people say, should have a greater possibility to enjoy more freedom. But the attempt to build a future for oneself alone can be difficult and can mean not having space for a child straight away. All these women, with very different stories and plans for their lives, have in common the need to decide when to have a child and when to avoid a pregnancy, at least during a certain period of their life. The use of contraception allows them to have a happy, responsible sex life, without the fear of unwanted pregnancies.



## HOW TO CHOOSE A METHOD OF BIRTH CONTROL

The birth control methods illustrated in this booklet are all reversible: when you stop using them, their contraceptive effect ceases.

In order to choose her own method of birth control, each woman must have information on contraceptives available, the correct directions for use of each one, the possible health risks involved and their effectiveness in preventing pregnancies. This information must come from qualified medical personnel. Beware of «bad advice». Frequently, acquaintances or friends provide untrue or incorrect information. The midwives working for the Consultorio Familiare are people qualified to help the woman or the couple in the most suitable choice of birth control methods. The effectiveness of a birth control method is measured by how good it is at preventing pregnancy. The rating must take into account also possible errors in the way it is used or its non-continuous use.

The choice is made by the woman or the couple in collaboration with the medical staff (midwife and gynaecologist), on the basis of their requirements. Single women, mothers who have recently given birth, women who already have children, women who frequently change partner or very young women all need different, specific contraceptives.

*The non-reversible method, surgical male or female sterilisation that makes it permanently impossible to have children, is used only in cases in which a further pregnancy is considered dangerous and only with the explicit consent of the person or people involved. The decision to opt for sterilisation must be well thought out by the woman or couple, taken after an in-depth interview with an expert (for example, at the Consultorio).*

### THE CHOICE OF CONTRACEPTIVE IS AN OCCASION TO EVALUATE ONE'S HEALTH AND SEX AND LOVE LIFE

The choice of contraceptive and the interview with the midwife or gynaecologist at the Consultorio Familiare (or with one's family doctor) can also represent an opportunity to evaluate the health of one's sexual organs. It is a good time to discuss the meaning and timeliness of some useful examinations (pelvic and breast examination, Pap test) and fix appointments for them. During these interviews, it is possible to clarify freely any doubts or problems associated with sexuality, both male and female. In other words, together with the medical staff, with complete respect for individual privacy, people can discuss problems like lack of sexual desire, premature ejaculation, difficulty in arousal and/or absence of orgasm.

# HOW WE ARE MADE

## PHYSIOLOGY OF FEMALE GENITAL SYSTEM

The arrival of the first menstruation marks the start of production of ovules in the ovary. Each menstruation is followed by three phases. The first is called preovulatory phase (6th - 12th day): in the ovary, the ovule matures and in the uterine cavity, the lining gets thicker. The second is called ovulatory phase (12th - 15th day): the ovule is expelled from the ovary and through the tubes arrives in the uterine cavity; here, it can be fertilized if the woman has intercourse with the discharge of sperm into the vagina. The third is called postovulatory (16th - 28th day): in the ovary, the follicle is transformed into corpus luteum responsible for the production of progesterone, the hormone that will guarantee the maintenance of the pregnancy in its initial stages. In the womb, the lining is ready to receive the fertilized ovule; if that does not happen, the lining is eliminated with the menstrual flux (menstrual phase that lasts 3-5 days).

The duration of the various phases of the menstrual cycle can vary greatly between one woman and another, but even the individual woman can have cycles of varying duration. In order to calculate one's own menstrual cycle, it is advisable to mark on a calendar the first day of each menstruation.

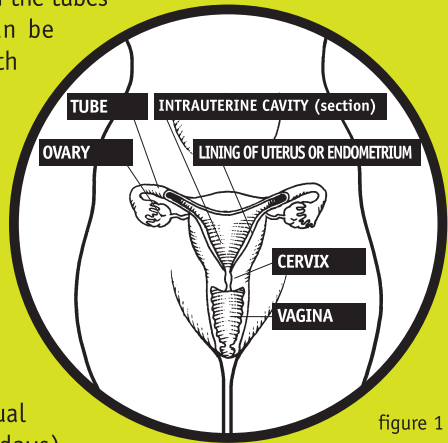


figure 1

## PHYSIOLOGY OF MALE GENITAL SYSTEM

When the male reaches puberty, his testicles start to produce spermatozooids and continue to do so for the whole of his life. During intercourse, the man ejaculates spermatozooids present in sperm, into the woman's vagina. Generally, a spermatozoid can live 24 to 120 hours.

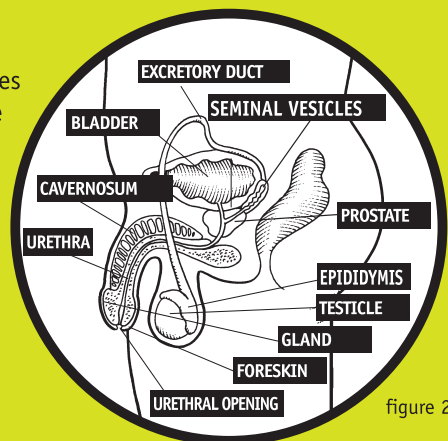


figure 2



## NATURAL METHODS OF BIRTH CONTROL

Natural methods of birth control allow a woman to identify her fertile periods. This can be useful to women who want to avoid a pregnancy and to those who wish to get pregnant. There are days on which the woman is fertile, others on which she is not fertile and days on which fertility is fairly unlikely but possible. Fertile days are recognised through subjective signs and readings.

All together, a woman can get pregnant after «complete» intercourse, that is to say with ejaculation inside the vagina, about six days per month, in practice, three days before ovulation, the day of ovulation and the next two days.

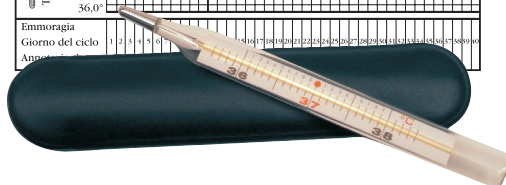
The aim of these methods is to determine the fertile period. Couples who want to avoid a pregnancy abstain from intercourse during that period. On the contrary, couples who want to start a pregnancy must concentrate their vaginal intercourse during the fertile days.

Evaluating the real effectiveness of natural methods, we can say that in a year, out of 100 couples 20 will start a pregnancy. If they are used correctly, their safety increases and the percentage of pregnancies varies from 5 to 9 per 100 couples. However, it is necessary to learn to use these methods correctly. The midwives working in the Consultori can provide all the necessary information and clarify any doubts. Below, you will find a brief description of natural birth control methods, but you must keep in mind that for all of them it is necessary to abstain from intercourse in the days indicated as fertile for the woman.

### ● Basal temperature method

It was perfected by observing the modifications in the woman's body temperature that occur during her monthly cycle. The daily reading of her temperature, taken with a thermometer as soon as she wakes up, allows the woman to determine the fertile period of her cycle.

Cognome e nome .....  
Mese .....  
Giorni del mese .....  
Temperatura rilevata  
37,5°  
37,0°  
36,5°  
36,0°  
Emmorragia  
Giorno del ciclo 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31  
Anno .....



### ● **Ogino-Knauss method**

It is a statistical method based on the determination of fertile days using the duration of the previous 12 menstrual cycles, recorded by the woman on a calendar.

### ● **Cervical mucus method (Billings)**

It consists of the daily observation of the appearance and consistency of vaginal mucus and the evaluation of sensations felt in the external genitalia. Fertile days are determined using these variations.

### ● **Sympto-thermal method**

This method combines the reading of body temperature with observation of the characteristics of vaginal mucus and other signs that accompany ovulation, like modifications in the cervix of the womb and soreness in the breasts.

### ● **Computerized method for determining the fertile period**

It is a small computer able to memorise information on personal menstrual characteristics and measure two hormones in morning urine using indicator strips. It can be used only by women who have cycles that last between 25/35 days.

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#### **ADVANTAGES**

These methods do not require medical check-ups or the use of medicines. They are well accepted by many religions. They increase the possibility of knowing the workings of one's body and intimacy within the couple.

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#### **DISADVANTAGES**

They are based on agreement between partners to avoid vaginal intercourse during the fertile period: for some couples, the need to avoid vaginal intercourse during the fertile period causes stress. Moreover, one should consider that there could be conditions (presence of infection, use of douches, use of vaginal gel or spermicides) that alter body temperature or the characteristics of cervical mucus and consequently make the interpretation of the parametres uncertain.

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#### **COST**

They cost nothing, except in the case of the computerised method for determining the fertile period or the thermometer for measuring the basal temperature.



## COITUS INTERRUPTUS

### WHAT IT IS

Coitus interruptus is considered a natural method of birth control since it does not require the use of substances or devices, but it is based on male behaviour. To use coitus interruptus effectively, the man must learn to recognise the right moment to withdraw his penis from the vagina, immediately prior to the emission of sperm. If intercourse is to be repeated, the man must urinate and wash his genitalia before continuing intercourse.

This method is considered fairly unreliable since out of 100 couples who use it per year, up to 19 of them are estimated to start a pregnancy.

Many factors make the method unreliable: spermatozooids may be present in the fluid emitted prior to ejaculation; the man does not always sense correctly the moment that precedes the climax and ejaculation.

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### ADVANTAGES

It does not require preparation and causes no risks to physical health.

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### DISADVANTAGES

Limited effectiveness in preventing pregnancy. It does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases (like, for example, the HIV-AIDS virus, hepatitis, gonorrhoea) for which condom use is essential in any case.





## THE PILL

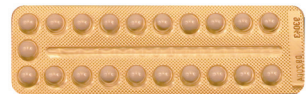
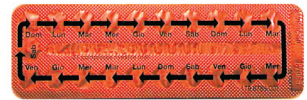
### WHAT IT IS

It is the common name for oral contraception. The type most used is a combination (combination pill) of two female hormones: oestrogen and progesterone. It prevents pregnancy by blocking ovulation and modifying the local activity of uterine mucus and the tubes. It is very effective in preventing pregnancy since out of 100 women using it correctly all year long only 0.5% will become pregnant. Considering errors most frequently made, 3 women out of 100 may become pregnant. Besides its contraceptive effect, the pill is used effectively in the treatment of numerous female ailments. It needs to be taken carefully and it is advisable to set oneself precise rules so as not to forget it.

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### WHAT TO DO

The pill must be prescribed by a doctor (at the Consultorio Familiar or a family doctor), who will study the patient's medical history, carry out a check-up, prescribe a Pap test and possibly order blood tests. However, periodical annual check-ups are advised. After an abortion, if there are no impediments, it can be taken from the evening after the operation. During the first 6 months following a birth, if the woman is breast-feeding, it is preferable to use a special type of pill called the «minipill» which does not affect the quantity of milk produced.



### ADVANTAGES

The pill is very effective if taken correctly. The effects are reversible, that is to say they cease as soon as one stops taking it. It performs other useful functions: it regularises menstruation and makes it less painful; it reduces menstrual flux preventing anaemia and cures acne.

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### DISADVANTAGES

Medical check-ups are necessary (at the Consultorio or at the family doctor's) before it can be prescribed and taken. Not all women are in the necessary physical condition to be able to take it (e.g. it is dangerous to women suffering from serious hypertension or thromboembolic ailments and to women who are heavy smokers). It does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases (like, for example, the HIV-AIDS virus, hepatitis, gonorrhoea), for which it is in any case advisable to use a condom. Rarely, it can cause problems that make women to stop taking it: weight gain, pain and constant swelling in the legs, headaches, depression, alteration of the libido. Serious problems are very rare and are usually connected to coagulation related disorders (thrombus - embolism).

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### COST

The price of each box varies according to the type. Only some of them are partially subsidised by the Health Service. Among the costs, one must also consider the initial medical check-up and any laboratory tests prescribed.



## THE PATCH

### WHAT IT IS

It is an adhesive square patch measuring just a few cm that contains the two female hormones contained in the pill (estrogens and progestins). They are released slowly every day and enter our body through the skin.

The patch can be applied on various parts of the body (buttock, back, stomach, upper arms...). The patch has to be replaced with a new one each week for three weeks, then you skip a week and start again.

### WHAT TO DO

The patch has to be prescribed by your doctor, who will perform the same checks and tests required for the pill. Annual check-ups are also recommended while patch treatment is in progress.

### ADVANTAGES

It has the same advantages as the pill. It is easier to use than the pill because it only needs changing once a week.

### DISADVANTAGES

It has the same disadvantages as the pill. Some women can have problems of local allergic reactions, with skin rashes and itching. In such cases, you will need to stop use and consult the specialist at the Consultorio or your family doctor.

### COST

Costs the same as the pill. It cannot be prescribed under the National Health Service.



## VAGINAL RING

### WHAT IT IS

It is a slim, transparent, flexible ring that the woman inserts into the vagina. It stays in the vagina for three weeks then it has to be removed for a week and a new one is then inserted for another three weeks. The vaginal ring slowly releases the female hormones - estrogens and progestins - and works by preventing ovulation, just like the pill and the patch.

### ADVANTAGES

It has the same advantages as the pill. It is very simple to use as it involves application and removal once a month, which makes it very easy to remember.

### DISADVANTAGES

It has the same disadvantages as the pill.

### COST

It costs the same as the pill.

It cannot be prescribed under the National Health Service.





## THE CONDOM (PROPHYLACTIC)

### WHAT IT IS

The prophylactic, commonly called condom, is a very thin membrane of latex that is fitted onto the penis. It collects sperm and stops it spilling out into the vagina. The condom, if used correctly, that is to say if it is removed only after intercourse is completely finished, prevents pregnancy: over one year's use from 6 to 12 out of a hundred women get pregnant. This protection increases if it is used together with spermicides (creams, foams, film, ovules). The condom makes intercourse safe also against the risk of sexually transmitted diseases because it blocks the exchange of biological fluids that may be infected, but it must be used for each act of intercourse for its whole duration. It protects both partners during vaginal, anal and oral sex acts. It offers good protection against the following infections: Vaginitis caused by trichomonas, Infection of female internal genitalia (called PID - pelvic inflammatory disease), Gonorrhoea, Chlamydia, Syphilis, HIV-AIDS. As for other infections (Condylomas, genital Herpes, Hepatitis B), the protection is a little less effective. The condom protects against sexually transmitted diseases: no other contraceptive provides this protection, but other contraceptives offer better protection against pregnancy.

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### WHAT TO DO

No prescription or medical examination is needed. Condoms can be bought at the chemist's, tobacconist's, in supermarkets and vending machines. Also spermicides are sold over the counter at the chemist's. They must be handled with care. The packet must not be kept near any source of heat (not in your glove compartment or wallet). Before use, it is essential to check the sell by date. It is better to use condoms that are already lubricated; when they are not, apply a lubricant inside and outside to prevent breakage. Lubricants must be water based (gel) since oily ones (creams, Vaseline, butter or oils) can favour breakage.

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### ADVANTAGES

It does not cause any health risks, does not require the assistance of a doctor and it is easy to use. It allows the man to participate effectively in contraception. It is a useful alternative to other methods, also for established couples, for example during breast-feeding.

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### DISADVANTAGES

If there is a flaw in its manufacture or is used incorrectly, there is the risk that the condom will break or come off during intercourse. Moreover, it may be seen with embarrassment as a «physical barrier» between the partners. To overcome this, it is best to try it out, unhurriedly, a few times on your penis before starting intercourse.

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### COST

The cost varies according to the type and the place of purchase.



## THE FEMALE CONDOM

### WHAT IT IS

The female condom is a soft and resistant transparent sheath made of polyurethane measuring approximately 17cm, which is inserted into the vagina before sexual intercourse. It protects against pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted diseases as it catches the sperm and prevents it from entering the vagina. It has a flexible ring on both ends: the internal ring is used to insert the female condom and to keep the end closed against the neck of the uterus. The external ring is soft and should remain outside the vagina during sexual intercourse: it covers the area around the vaginal opening, forming a barrier between the penis and the vagina itself, as well as the cervix and the external genitals. It is lubricated with a silicone-based product.

### WHAT TO DO

It does not require a doctor's prescription, or a medical examination. The female condom can be bought or ordered from any pharmacy. Prior to use you should check the expiry date. Although it is already lubricated, it is recommended that you lubricate it more prior to use. Lubricants may be water based (gel), oily (creams, Vaseline, butter or oils) and may be freely purchased from any pharmacy. It should not be used at the same time as a condom, as this may cause breakage to occur. It should always only be used once. It is not necessary to remove it immediately after intercourse. This contraceptive method requires practice and patience: you should practise inserting it and removing it a few times before using it for the first time during sexual intercourse.



### ADVANTAGES

When used correctly, the female condom is as effective as all other barrier contraceptive methods. It may be inserted up to 8 hours prior to the moment of intercourse, therefore not interrupting sexual spontaneity. It poses no health risks and does not require medical intervention; it can be purchased without a doctor's prescription. It is a method that allows women to manage their sexuality first hand, representing, as it does, a full protective barrier for the vagina, the cervix and the external genitals. It is already lubricated with a silicone-based product, which does not act as a spermicide. The material that it is made from is more resistant than the latex used for the majority of male condoms on sale and it does not cause allergic reactions.

### DISADVANTAGES

It is difficult to come by, and its application requires some practice: inexperience in use initially makes it a contraceptive method that is not completely safe. As far as side effects are concerned, some women have complained of minor irritations while for others the internal ring feels uncomfortable. As is the case for male condoms, incorrect usage does not guarantee the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

### COST

The cost is charged entirely to the user. It is more expensive than other contraceptive methods; among the costs you should also bear in mind the cost of lubricants, the application of which is recommended, and possibly also spermicides.



## EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

### WHAT IT IS

Emergency contraception prevents pregnancy after unprotected or «unsafe» intercourse and is also called morning after contraception; it can be carried out in two ways: through the administration of hormones or the fitting of a coil (IUD). If the woman is already pregnant, emergency hormone-based contraception cannot cause an abortion.

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### WHAT TO DO

After «unsafe» intercourse, if the woman fears she may be pregnant, she must immediately contact the Consultorio Familiare or her family doctor or a gynaecological emergency ward. The doctors will provide her with all necessary information, advise on the most suitable type of emergency contraception and write out prescriptions. It can be requested:

- when the condom has broken and ejaculation took place inside the vagina
  - if the man did not manage to ejaculate outside the vagina
  - if the method used is periodical abstinence, when the woman did not calculate correctly her «fertile days»
  - when the woman has forgotten to take her contraceptive pill
  - when the couple has not used any form of contraception.
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### ADVANTAGES

Emergency contraception reduces by 75% the probability that «unsafe» intercourse will be followed by a pregnancy.

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### DISADVANTAGES

It does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases. It is not effective in preventing pregnancy if the woman has had other unprotected intercourse during the month.

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### COST

Comparable to the monthly cost of the «pill» or to that of the coil.



## INJECTED CONTRACEPTION Periodical injection

### WHAT IT IS

It is a monthly or three-monthly intramuscular injection of the chemical medroxyprogesterone acetate which can ensure long-term, highly effective contraception. The three-monthly injection prevents pregnancy for three months, the monthly one prevents it for one month. Out of 1,000 women using it in a year, only 3 of them become pregnant.

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### WHAT TO DO

The prescription is issued by a gynaecologist after having studied the woman's medical history, carried out a pelvic examination and any necessary tests. The injection is made into the arm or the buttock every 4 or 12 weeks, according to the dosage used.

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### ADVANTAGES

It is an individual choice made by the woman; nobody can know she is using this method.

It does not interfere with sexual activity.

It can be used during breast-feeding (from six weeks after the birth).

It reduces menstrual cramps and anaemia; it protects against ovary and uterine cancer.

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### DISADVANTAGES

It is necessary to have an injection every three months or every month. Its effects are not rapidly reversible. It is possible that after the woman has stopped using it, she is not able to get pregnant for many months. Side effects like irregular menstruation or a bloated feeling can continue for some months after the woman has stopped using it.

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### COST

Doses of the product are inexpensive, however, when calculating the cost, one must take into consideration the initial medical check-up and the need to go periodically to the doctor to have the injection.





## COIL

### WHAT IT IS

It is a small, flexible plastic object, can be of various shapes, three or four centimetres long and a few millimetres thick which, inserted into the uterine cavity, very effectively prevents pregnancy. In a year, out of 100 women who use this method, only one will become pregnant. There are two types of coil that act with slightly different mechanisms, obtaining two results: the spermatozooids are slowed down or made ineffective, moreover, the mucus lining of the uterus acquires characteristics that are unsuitable for receiving a pregnancy. One type of coil releases copper and silver ions to obtain the contraceptive effect; the second type releases a hormone similar to progesterone (levonorgestrel).

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### WHAT TO DO

The coil must be prescribed and fitted by a gynaecologist (for example the one working at the Consultorio) after a pelvic examination. The coil works over a long period of time: from three to five years, according to the type. So the initial cost of buying it is spread over many years' use.

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### ADVANTAGES

Once it is inserted, it is not necessary to add any other birth control methods, but it is advisable to remember it has been fitted. It is, in any case, necessary to undergo periodical pelvic examinations (usually once a year). The coil acts only on the reproductive system and not on the whole body. The coil that releases a hormone (levonorgestrel) reduces the intensity of the menstrual flux.

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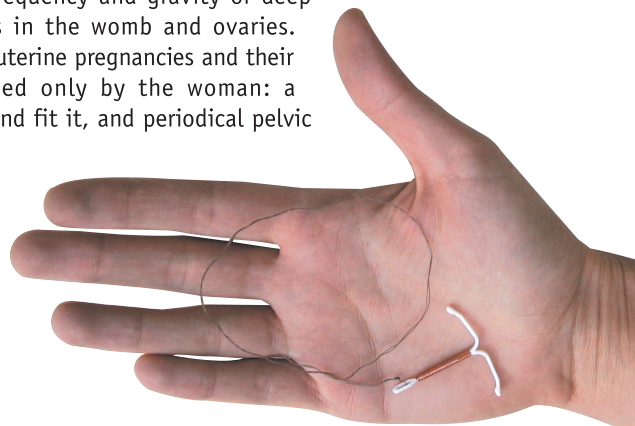
### DISADVANTAGES

The coils that release copper ions can, sometimes, lengthen the duration of the menstrual flux and increase its intensity; moreover, they can increase menstrual pain. In young women who have not given birth, or in those who often change partners, the coil can increase the frequency and gravity of deep infections, that is to say, infections in the womb and ovaries. The coil does not protect against extrauterine pregnancies and their consequences. It cannot be managed only by the woman: a gynaecologist is needed to prescribe and fit it, and periodical pelvic examinations are necessary.

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### COST

The initial cost of the product is quite high. Considering its long-term use (3-5 years) and its great effectiveness, it may be considered a low cost method.





# CONOSCERE PER SCEGLIERE

**Services involved in the project:** Spazio donne immigrate Forlì, Spazio donne immigrate Rimini, Consultorio donne immigrate e loro bambini Bologna, Centro salute donne straniere Modena, Spazio donne immigrate Ravenna, Centro per la salute della famiglia straniera Reggio Emilia, Spazio donne immigrate Parma, Spazio donne immigrate Sassuolo.

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