YOUR GUIDE TO

Diaphragms and caps

Helping you choose the method of contraception that is best for you
Diaphragms and caps

Diaphragms and caps are barrier methods of contraception. They fit inside your vagina and cover your cervix. Spherical diaphragms are circular discs made of thin, soft rubber with a flexible rim. Condom caps are smaller. These varieties of caps are becoming available made from silicon. To be effective, diaphragms and caps need to be used with a spermicide. Spermicides are chemicals that destroy sperm.

Questions & Answers

How effective are diaphragms and caps?

How effective any contraceptive depends on how old you are, how often you have sex, whether you follow the instructions. If 90% sexually active women don't use any contraception, 80 to 90 will become pregnant in a year. If used according to instructions, diaphragms and caps are 95% effective. This means that between 4 and 8 women in 100 will get pregnant in a year. If they are used according to instructions, more women will get pregnant.

How does a diaphragm or cap work?

A diaphragm or cap stops sperm reaching an egg. It covers your cervix while the spermicide kills any sperm.

Can anything make a diaphragm or cap less effective?

A diaphragm or cap will be less effective if:

- You don't use it every time you have sex.
- It doesn't fit your cervix.
- You use it without spermicide.
- You use the spermicide incorrectly.
- You leave it in for 6 hours after the last time you had sex.
- You use spermicide products with rubber diaphragms or caps.

What are the disadvantages of a diaphragm or cap?

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- It is not as convenient as other methods.
- It is not as effective as some other methods.
- It can cause irritation or infection in some women and their partners.
- Using a different spermicide may help.

Can anyone use a diaphragm or cap?

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Most women can use a diaphragm or cap. There are some conditions which may make you avoid using a diaphragm or cap, such as:

- Sensitive or irritated cervix
- Spermicide allergy

What are the advantages of a diaphragm or cap?

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- It can be used by women who cannot have a birth control implant.
- It can be used by women who cannot use hormonal contraceptives.
- It can be used by women who cannot use intrauterine devices.
- It reduces the risk of sexually transmitted infections.

If you have any questions or concerns, please consult a healthcare professional.
How do I look after my rubber diaphragm or cap?
When you take your rubber diaphragm or cap out, wash it in warm water with a mild unperfumed soap or baby soap. Then rinse thoroughly. Dry it carefully and keep it in its box in a cool dry place. Never boil your diaphragm or cap and never use bleach powder, disinfectant, detergent or any oil-based product on it.

Before use, check it regularly for tears or holes by holding it up to the light and having a good look at it. Be careful with your nails and jewellery. If your diaphragm goes out of shape, square it gently back into its circular shape. Your diaphragm or cap may become discoloured. But don't worry, this will not make it less effective.

Silicone caps may need to be washed. Others are used once only and then thrown away.

Can I use my cap or diaphragm during my period?
Yes, your diaphragm or cap will collect the blood. Take your diaphragm or cap out six hours after you have sex and use a sanitary towel or tampons. Don't wear a rubber diaphragm or cap for longer than 30 hours a time because of the possible risk of toxic shock syndrome (TSS).

Can I have a bath when I've got my diaphragm or cap in?
Put your diaphragm or cap in after a bath rather than before. This is because water may wash away the spermicide or move the cap. Have a shower rather than a bath during the six hours that you need to keep your diaphragm or cap in after you have had sex.

The effect of swimming or water sports has not been studied, but it is likely to be small.

What is a practice rubber diaphragm or cap?
Practice diaphragms and caps give you time and privacy to find out if a diaphragm or cap is suitable for you and to learn how to use it properly.

A doctor or nurse will fit you with a practice diaphragm or cap that will be the right size for you. Don't rely on it to stop you getting pregnant. You will need to use another method of contraception if you have sex. Male condoms can be used.

During this time try putting the diaphragm or cap in and check that it covers your cervix. You can also see with the diaphragm or cap in place and leave it in for a few hours to find out if it is comfortable for you and your partner. It is also a good idea to use the spermicide pills or cream to make sure that you and your partner do not mind the wet feeling.

When you go back to get it checked, wear the diaphragm or cap so the doctor or nurse can check that you have put it in properly and that it is the right size. Ask them any questions you have about using the diaphragm or cap. They will then give you one that you can use for contraception.

How do I find a family planning doctor or clinic?
Contraception is free through the National Health Service.

You can find lists of GPs in libraries, post offices and advice centres or from health visitors, health authorities or health boards. Doctors who give contraceptive advice have the letter 'C' after their names.

You can get details of your nearest family planning or sexual health clinic from your phone book, health centre, hospital, maternity or sexual health advice centre, health authority or health board.

Young people can phone Brook on 0800 0185 023 for details of the nearest Brook clinic offering contraceptive advice.

You can find out all clinics from fpa's CEE helpline on 020 78417 4044.