YOUR GUIDE TO

The IUD

Helping you choose the method of contraception that is best for you
The intrauterine device (IUD)

An IUD is a small plastic and copper device that is fitted into your womb. It has one or two soft threads at the end. These thin threads come through the opening at the neck of your womb (cervix) into the top of your vagina. IUDs need to be fitted by a trained doctor or nurse. An IUD can stay in for three to ten years, depending on type. An IUD used to be called a coil.

How effective is an IUD?

Out of every 100 sexually active women who don't use any contraception, 60 to 90 will become pregnant in a year. Out of every 100 women who use an IUD up to two women may become pregnant in a year. With newer types of IUD less than one woman in 100 will become pregnant in a year.

How does an IUD work?

The main way an IUD works is by stopping sperm reaching an egg. It may also do the following:

- Make the egg move more slowly along the fallopian tube.
- Stop the egg from settling in the womb.

What are the advantages of an IUD?

- It works as soon as it is put in.
- You don't have to think about contraception for as long as it is in place.
- It works for three to ten years depending on type.
- It doesn't interfere with sex.

What are the disadvantages of an IUD?

- Your periods may be heavier or longer or more painful. This may improve after a few months.
- There is a very small chance of you getting an infection during the first 30 days after an IUD is put in. Many doctors advise you to have a check for any possible existing infections before they fit an IUD.
- If you are at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (by having more than one sexual partner or if your partner has other partners) you could get a pelvic infection at any time.
- The IUD can be pushed out of your womb (dislodged) or it can move (displacement). The IUD may only last a year and you may not know it has happened. This is why your doctor or nurse will teach you how to check your IUD threads every month.
- Nests: an IUD might get through (perforate) your womb or cervix when it is fitted. It may cause pain but often there are no symptoms. If this happens, the IUD may have to be removed by surgery. Perforation of the IUD is rare when an IUD is fitted by a qualified doctor or nurse.
- If you do become pregnant while you are using an IUD there is a small risk of you having an ectopic pregnancy. This is when the pregnancy develops outside your womb, usually in a fallopian tube. Although this is rare, it is dangerous.
- An IUD does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections, so you may have to use condoms as well.

Can anyone use an IUD?

Not everyone can use an IUD and your doctor or nurse will need to decide about your own health and your family's medical history. Do mention any risk or operations which you have had. Some of the conditions which may mean you should not use an IUD are:

- You think you might already be pregnant.
- You have an untreated sexually transmitted infection.
- You and your partner are at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection.

Where can I get an IUD?

Family planning clinics, sexual health clinics and some GPs fit IUDs. All the treatment you get is confidential and free.

How can I get an IUD fitted?

An IUD is usually put in either towards the end of your period or a few days after. It can be fitted up to day 19 of a 28-day menstrual cycle. The doctor or nurse will examine you externally to find the position and size of your womb before they fit an IUD. They must make sure you have no chance of being pregnant before they fit an IUD. Sometimes they will check for any possible existing infection. There are different types and sizes of IUD to suit different women. It can be uncomfortable having an IUD fitted and you might want to have a painkiller or local anaesthetic. Talk to your doctor or nurse about this beforehand. You may get a period type pain for a few days after the IUD is fitted. Painkillers can help with this.

What if I feel unwell after the IUD is fitted?

If you feel unwell and have any pain in your lower abdomen with a high temperature or a smelly discharge from your vagina in the first three weeks after the IUD is fitted see a doctor or go back to the family planning clinic as soon as possible. This is because you may have an infection.
How will I know that the IUD is still in place?

A: An IUD has one or two threads attached to the end which hang a little way down from your womb into the top of your vagina. The doctor or nurse will teach you how to feel the threads to make sure the IUD is still in place. You should do this a few times in the first month and then each period or at regular intervals.

It is very unlikely that an IUD will come out, but if you cannot feel the threads, or if you think you can feel the IUD itself, see your doctor or nurse straight away. In the meantime, use an extra contraceptive method, such as condoms.

Rupture your partner may say he can feel the threads during sex. If this is the case, get your doctor or nurse to check the threads and either move them out of the way or shorten them.

What if I change my mind?

A: A trained doctor or nurse can take out the IUD at any time. If you are not going to have another IUD put in, and you don't want to become pregnant, use an extra contraceptive method, such as condoms, for seven days before the IUD is taken out. This is to stop sperm getting into your body. Sperm can live for up to seven days inside your body and could fertilize an egg once the IUD is removed. Your usual fertility returns as soon as the IUD is taken out.

Will an IUD affect my periods?

A: Your periods may be heavier or longer especially during the first few months of having an IUD. You may also have some slight bleeding between your first two or three periods after you have had the IUD fitted.

What if I become pregnant while I am using an IUD?

A: Very few women become pregnant with an IUD. If you have a light or delayed period, or if you have a sudden or unusual pain in your lower abdomen, see your doctor straight away as these might be the warning signs of an ectopic pregnancy.

If you want to continue with the pregnancy, and it is not an ectopic pregnancy, the IUD should be removed as soon as possible by your doctor.

This reduces the risk of miscarriage, though this can still happen. If you do not have a miscarriage, the IUD will not harm the baby.

I've just had a baby. Can I use an IUD?

A: An IUD is usually fitted about six weeks after a normal birth and about eight weeks after a miscarriage. If you have sex before an IUD is fitted you will need to use another contraceptive method during this time.

Can I use an IUD after an abortion or miscarriage?

A: You can have an IUD fitted immediately after an abortion or miscarriage if you were pregnant for less than 12 weeks.

How do I find a family planning doctor or clinic?

A: Contraception is free through the National Health Service.

- You can find lists of GPs in libraries, post offices and advice centres or from helplines, health authorities or health boards. Doctors who give contraceptive advice have the letters CO after their names.

- You can get details of your nearest family planning or sexual health clinic from your phone book under 'health', hospital, medical or health visitor, advice centre, helpline, health authority or health board.

- Young people can phone Brook on 0800 0185 0235 for details of the nearest Brook clinic offering contraceptive advice.

- You can find out about all clinics from the FPA: CENS helpline on 020 7683 4044.

Emergency contraception

If you have had sex without using contraception or think your method might have failed there are two emergency methods you can use.

- Emergency pills - must be started up to six days (72 hours) after sex. They are more effective the earlier they are started after sex.

- An IUD - must be fitted up to five days after sex.

Sexually transmitted infections

Male and female condoms can help prevent against sexually transmitted infections. Male latex condoms should carry the BSI Kitemark (BS EN 460) and European CE mark. Diaphragms and caps may also protect against some sexually transmitted infections.

How FPA can help you

FPA National Contraception Education Service (CENS) helpline opens Monday to Friday 9-5.

- confidential information and advice on contraception and sexual and reproductive health

- details of family planning and sexual health clinics and other sexual health services

- a wide range of leaflets

FPA UK

- 47-51 Hackney Road, London E8 1NF, UK
- Phone 020 7683 4044

FPA Northern Ireland

- 82-84 Donegall Street, Belfast BT12 6HT
- Phone 028 90 775 100

FPA Scotland

- 1st Floor, 10-12 Commercial Place, G1 2PA
- Phone 0808 223 2727

FPA Scotland

- 1st Floor, 10-12 Commercial Place, G1 2PA
- Phone 0808 223 2727

A final word

The leaflet can give you basic information about the IUD. The information is based on the evidence and medical opinion available at the time this leaflet was printed. Different people may give you different advice on certain points.

Remember - contact your doctor or a family planning clinic if you are worried or unsure about anything.

FPA

Contraception Education Service

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