your guide to
the contraceptive vaginal ring

Helping you choose the method of contraception that is best for you
The contraceptive vaginal ring

The contraceptive vaginal ring is a flexible, transparent, plastic ring. It is placed in the vagina where it releases two hormones – estrogen and progestogen. These are similar to the natural hormones that

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women produce in their ovaries and are like those used in the combined oral contraceptive pill.

**How effective is the vaginal ring?**

How effective any contraceptive is depends on how old you are, how often you have sex and whether you follow the instructions.

If 100 sexually active women don't use any contraception, 80-90 will become pregnant in a year.

If the vaginal ring is used correctly and according to instructions it is over 99 per cent effective. This means that less than one woman in 100 will get...
pregnant in a year.

If the vaginal ring is not used according to instructions, more women will become pregnant.

**How does the vaginal ring work?**

The vaginal ring releases a constant dose of hormones into the bloodstream through the vaginal wall. The main way it works is to stop the ovaries from releasing an egg each month (ovulation). It also:

- Thickens the mucus from your cervix. This makes it difficult for a sperm to move through it and reach an egg.
- Makes the lining of the uterus (womb) thinner so it is less likely to accept a fertilised egg.

**Where can I get the vaginal ring?**

You can go to a contraception or sexual health clinic, or a general practice. If you prefer not to go to your own general practice, or if they don’t provide contraceptive services, they can give you information about another practice or clinic. All treatment is free and confidential. You don’t need to have a breast examination or cervical screening test when you are first prescribed the vaginal ring.

**Can anyone use the vaginal ring?**

Not everyone can use the vaginal ring so your doctor or nurse will need to ask you about your own and your family’s medical history. Do mention any illnesses or operations you have had. Some of the conditions which may mean you should not use the vaginal ring are:

- you think you might be pregnant
- you smoke and are 35 years old or over
- you are 35 years old or older and stopped smoking less than a year ago
• you are very overweight
• you take certain medicines
• your vaginal muscles can’t hold a vaginal ring.

You have now or had in the past:
• thrombosis (blood clots) in any vein or artery
• a heart abnormality or circulatory disease including high blood pressure (hypertension)
• current breast cancer or breast cancer within the last five years
• very severe migraines or migraines with aura
• active disease of the gall bladder or liver
• diabetes with complications or diabetes for more than 20 years
• unexplained bleeding from your vagina
• current cervical, ovarian, vaginal or uterine cancer.

If you are healthy, don’t smoke and there are no medical reasons for you not to use the vaginal ring, you can use it until you are 50 years old. You will then need to change to another method of contraception.

**What are the advantages of the vaginal ring?**

Some of the advantages of the vaginal ring are:
• you don’t have to think about it every day – you only use one ring a month
• it doesn’t interrupt sex
• it is easy to insert and remove
• unlike the pill, the hormones do not need to be absorbed by the stomach, so the ring is not affected if you vomit or have diarrhoea
• bleeding will usually become more regular, lighter and less painful
- it may help with premenstrual symptoms
- it may reduce the risk of cancer of the ovary, uterus and colon
- it may reduce the risk of fibroids, ovarian cysts and non-cancerous breast disease.

**What are the disadvantages of the vaginal ring?**

There are some serious side effects of the vaginal ring (see below Are there any risks?). In addition:
- Some women may not feel comfortable inserting and removing it.
- You may get temporary side effects at first including increased vaginal discharge and vaginal infections, headaches, nausea, breast tenderness and mood changes.
- Breakthrough bleeding and spotting (unexpected vaginal bleeding on days you are using the ring) may occur in the first few months of ring use (see page 16).
- The vaginal ring does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections, so you may need to use condoms as well.

**Are there any risks?**

The vaginal ring can have some serious side effects, but these are not common. For most women the benefits of using the ring outweigh the possible risks. All risks and benefits should be discussed with your doctor or nurse.
- A very small number of women may develop a blood clot which can block a vein (venous thrombosis) or an artery (arterial thrombosis or heart attack or stroke). If you have ever had a thrombosis, you should not use the vaginal ring.
- The risk of venous thrombosis is greatest during
the first year that you use the vaginal ring and if you smoke, you are very overweight, are immobile for a long period of time or use a wheelchair, have severe varicose veins or a member of your immediate family had a venous thrombosis before they were 45 years old.

- The risk of arterial thrombosis is greatest if you smoke, are diabetic, have high blood pressure, are very overweight, have migraines with aura, or a member of your immediate family had a heart attack or stroke before they were 45 years old.

- Research into the risk of breast cancer and hormonal contraception is complex and contradictory. Research suggests that users of all hormonal contraception appear to have a small increased risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer compared to non-users of hormonal contraception. Further research is ongoing.

- Research suggests that there is a small increase in the risk of developing cervical cancer with longer use of estrogen and progestogen hormonal contraception.

- Some research suggests a link between using estrogen and progestogen hormonal contraception and developing a very rare liver cancer.

See a doctor straightaway if you have any of the following:

- pain in the chest, including any sharp pain which is worse when you breathe in
- breathlessness
- you cough up blood
- painful swelling in your leg(s)
- weakness, numbness or bad 'pins and needles' in an arm or leg
• severe stomach pains
• a bad fainting attack or you collapse
• unusual headaches or migraines that are worse than usual
• sudden problems with your speech or eyesight
• jaundice (yellowing skin or yellowing eyes).

If you need to go into hospital for an operation or you have an accident which affects the movement of your legs, you should tell the doctor that you are using the vaginal ring. The doctor will decide if you need to stop using the ring or need other treatment to reduce the risk of developing a blood clot.

**Will I put on weight if I use the vaginal ring?**

No. Research has not shown that women put on weight when they use the vaginal ring. However, some women may find their weight changes throughout their cycle due to fluid retention.

**When can I first start to use the vaginal ring?**

If you did not use a hormonal contraceptive during your previous menstrual cycle and you are sure you’re not pregnant, insert the vaginal ring on the first day of your period. You will be protected against pregnancy immediately. You can also start the ring on days 2–5 of your period but you must use additional contraception, such as condoms, for the first seven days you use the ring.

If you start the ring at any other time in your menstrual cycle you will also need to use additional contraception, such as condoms, for the first seven days.

If you are switching from another contraceptive method your doctor or nurse will advise you on when to start using the vaginal ring.
I've just had a baby. Can I use the vaginal ring?
If you feel comfortable you can start to use the vaginal ring three weeks (21 days) after you give birth if you are not breastfeeding. Starting on day 21 you will be protected from pregnancy immediately. If you start later than day 21 you will need to use additional contraception for the first seven days you use the ring.

If you are breastfeeding a baby, the vaginal ring may reduce your flow of milk. It is usually recommended that you use a different method of contraception.

Can I use the vaginal ring after a miscarriage or abortion?
Yes. You can start using the vaginal ring immediately after a miscarriage or abortion if you were pregnant for less than 24 weeks. You will be protected against pregnancy immediately.

How do I insert the vaginal ring?
Your doctor or nurse should advise you on how to insert and remove the vaginal ring. With clean hands squeeze the ring between your thumb and finger and use one hand to insert it into your vagina. If necessary, spread your labia (vaginal lips)