What is a female condom?

Alice,

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Answer

Dear Reader,

A female condom is a method of contraception worn by women that's inserted inside the vagina before sex. Made of soft nitrile (a synthetic rubber), it's shaped like a long tube or sheath, with one closed end and one open end, creating a barrier between the penis and the vaginal canal. Similar to the male condom, when used consistently and correctly, the female condom prevents pregnancy and reduces the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission. For some women, the female condom is an ideal form of contraception because it is woman-controlled; women can take the initiative to protect themselves, particularly those whose partners are unwilling or unable to use male condoms. It can also be a good alternative for those who have a latex sensitivity or allergy.

The female condom can be a bit intimidating to someone who has never seen or used one before. Once familiar with it, it can be easy to use. If you look at the female condom, you'll notice that at each end, there's a flexible ring. These rings help to keep the female condom in place once it's inserted. The fixed outer ring secures the opening, where the penis glides in and out of the vagina during sex. The moveable inner ring sits at the bottom of the condom to secure the tube in place. The end of the sheath is closed off so that it can collect the ejaculated sperm.

To insert the female condom:

- Hold the sheath at the closed end and pinch the inner ring so that it becomes long and narrow.
- Gently insert the inner ring end as far into the vagina as possible, using your index finger to push up the inner ring until your finger reaches your cervix (similar to how a diaphragm would be inserted). It won't go in too deep or get lost inside your vagina. When in place, it'll cover the opening of the cervix and line the vaginal walls. A general indicator is that you'll no longer be able to feel the ring. The outer ring must always remain outside the vaginal opening.
- Before having intercourse, be sure that it hangs straight and isn't twisted. Then, add water-based lube on the penis and/or to the inside of the female condom to increase
comfort and decrease noise.

- After sex, twist the outer ring, gently remove the female condom, and discard (don't flush it down the toilet).

If you choose this method of contraception, carefully read the instructions enclosed in the box before use.

Some women like to practice inserting the female condom a few times before having intercourse so they can become comfortable using it. Keep in mind that each female condom can only be used once. Also, never use the female condom together with a male condom. Rather than providing double the protection, using two condoms can create more friction, and make one of both of the condoms more likely to break during sex.

Before using this method of contraception, consider the pros and cons:

**Pros:**

- A woman can take the initiative and offer her partner the choice between his or her condoms.
- It helps to reduce the risk of HIV and STI transmission.
- It can be inserted up to eight hours before sex.
- A man doesn't have to be fully erect when his partner uses the female condom.
- It's an option for those who have a latex allergy or sensitivity.
- No prescription needed! It can be purchased over-the-counter.

**Cons:**

- It can be more expensive than male condoms.
- It may be awkward to use because the outer ring must stay outside of the vagina during sex.
- Since the female condom is inserted into the vagina, it's necessary to be comfortable touching the genital area.
- It may cause irritation.
- Without enough lube, it may make strange sounds.

The female condom is sold under the brand name FC2®, and is available over-the-counter at pharmacies, grocery stores, and online wherever male condoms are sold. For answers to common questions and other information about the female condom, check out the FC2® website [2]. For more information about other non-latex condoms, take a look at the Condoms [3] category in the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health [4] archives. Hope this helps!

Alice!

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Published date:
Feb 02, 2001
Last reviewed on:
Feb 27, 2015