Dear Alice,

In exploring other forms of contraception, what is the reliability rate of the "sponge"?

— Spongey

**Answer**

Dear Spongey,

Thanks for stopping by the site as you make your way through your contraceptive information expedition. To answer your question, the contraceptive sponge is 91 percent effective at preventing unintended pregnancy if used correctly and consistently. If use is less than perfect and/or used inconsistently, effectiveness is estimated at 88 percent (more on the difference between the two rates in a bit). This round, polyurethane sponge is about two-and-a-quarter inches across and three-quarters of an inch thick and has an indentation or "dimple" in the center. This method of birth control is used by inserting it deep into the vagina before intercourse; it has a small loop to hook your finger around for easy removal. Upon insertion, it acts as a physical barrier between sperm and egg to prevent fertilization. It also contains spermicide (nonoxynol-9) and absorbs semen after ejaculation. Seems simple enough, right? Before concluding your information-gathering journey, you might also want to learn more about what factors into the effectiveness of the method and the pros and cons of use.
As far as effectiveness is concerned, correct use of the contraceptive sponge means a number of things: (1) the sponge is thoroughly wet with clean tap water to activate the spermicide; (2) it's squeezed several times until it becomes sudsy (it needs to be sudsy during insertion); (3) it's inserted as far back into the vagina as fingers will allow, with the dimple directly on the opening of the cervix and the loop hanging under the sponge; (4) the sponge completely covers the cervix (this can be checked by tracing the edge of the sponge with a finger); and, (5) the sponge is left in place for at least six hours after sex.

Some errors that could compromise the effectiveness of the sponge (and thus, lowering the effectiveness rate) include not wetting the sponge well enough, removing the sponge less than six hours after intercourse, not inserting the sponge until after a penis has been inserted or intercourse has begun, and not using the sponge every time a person has intercourse.

In choosing a form of contraception, it's best to consider additional factors above and beyond effectiveness; for example, the sponge:

- Is safe and effective for up to 24 hours.
- Is hormone-free.
- Easily allows for spontaneous intercourse (it can be inserted up to 24 hours before sex).
- Easily accommodates repeated intercourse with protection (it needs to stay in for at least six hours after last intercourse).
- Doesn't need to be fitted by a health care provider — it's one-size-fits-all!
- Is available over-the-counter (OTC) — no prescription is necessary.
- Is not as messy as other contraceptive methods that use spermicidal creams, foams, or gels.
- Is instantly reversible — users can decide when they want or no longer want protection from pregnancy.
- Is usually unnoticed by either partner.
- Is easy to use with practice.

Though there are a number of pros associated with the use of the sponge, it does have its disadvantages:

- It’s less effective than hormonal birth control methods.
- There’s a possibility for vaginal irritation due to the use of spermicide (nonoxynol-9), which may increase the risk of urinary tract infections (UTIs) and HIV transmission [2].
- It may also increase the risk for toxic shock syndrome (TSS) [3].
- It doesn’t protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- For some women, it may be difficult to remove.

Information-gathering is certainly helpful as you determine which birth control method might be good for you. However, speaking with your health care provider about your contraceptive quest will also guide you in the direction of the safest and most appropriate method based on your wants, needs, and personal health history.

Three cheers for soaking up some birth control knowledge!
Related questions

- Best contraception with a condom? [7]
- Who brings the contraception: Men or women? [8]
- An explanation of contraceptive failure rates [9]
- Emergency contraception? [10]
- Tell me more about the contraceptive implant [11]
- Where are contraceptive sponges? [12]

Resources

- Medical Services (Morningside) [13]
- Medical Services (CUIMC) [14]

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