

What is a female (internal) condom? ^[1]

Alice,

What is a female condom?

Answer

Dear Reader,

A female condom (commonly referred to as an internal condom) is a method of contraception that's inserted inside of the user's 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 (commonly referred to as an external condom), the internal condom can help prevent pregnancy and reduce the risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission when used consistently and correctly. And it's great that you've asked the question, because knowing what it is, how to use it, and the pros and cons associated with it can help with making decisions about how to protect yourself and your partner(s) during sex.

The internal condom can be a bit intimidating to someone who has never seen or used one before. It can be easy to use though, once familiar with it. When looking at the internal condom, you'll notice that they're well lubricated (for ease of insertion) and at each end, there's a flexible ring. These rings help to keep the condom in place once it's inserted. The fixed outer ring secures the opening. 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 ejaculated sperm.

To use the internal 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 an index finger to push up the inner ring until the finger reaches the cervix (similar to how a diaphragm would be inserted). Not to worry, it won't go in too deep or get lost inside the vagina. When in place, it'll cover the opening of the cervix and line the vaginal walls. A general indicator of proper placement is that the ring isn't noticeable anymore to the user. The outer ring must

always remain outside the vaginal opening.

- Before sex, be sure that it hangs straight and isn't twisted. Then, add water-based lube on the penis or to the inside of the condom to increase comfort.
- During sex, be sure to hold the external ring in place while the penis is guided into the vagina to make sure it stays in place.
- After sex, twist the outer ring, gently remove the 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 folks like to practice inserting the internal condom a few times before having sex so they can become comfortable using it. Keep in mind that each internal condom can only be used once; a new one needs to be inserted for those feeling randy for round two (or three, or four...). Also, **never** use the internal condom together with an external condom. Rather than providing double the protection, using the two together can create more friction and make one or both of the condoms more likely to break during sex.

Before using this method of contraception, it's also wise to consider the pros and cons:

Pros:

- If used correctly and consistently every time, it can be 95 percent effective at preventing pregnancy (when accounting for potential user error, it tends to be around 75 to 82 percent effective).
- Allows those with a vagina to take the initiative with a barrier method of birth control.
- It helps to reduce the risk of HIV and STI transmission — and its use for this purpose is compatible with hormonal methods of birth control such as the pill, [patch](#) [2], ring, implant, shot, and [intrauterine device \(IUD\)](#) [3].
- It can be inserted up to eight hours before sex.
- A full erection (for those who have a penis) isn't necessary when a partner is using an internal condom.
- It's an option for those who have an allergy or sensitivity to latex or polyurethane.
- No prescription needed! It can be purchased over-the-counter (and may be free in some locations).
- There are no hormones associated with this method, which may be an option for those who are sensitive to hormonal birth control.

Cons:

- Internal condoms can be more expensive than external condoms.
- Some may find using them a bit awkward because the outer ring must stay outside of the vagina during sex.
- Since the internal condom is inserted into the vagina, it's necessary to be comfortable touching the genital area.
- It may cause irritation.
- It's been noted that without enough lube, it may make some sounds (though with the newer nitrile material, this is less likely).

The internal condom is sold under the brand name *FC2®*, and is available over-the-counter at pharmacies, grocery stores, and online — usually wherever external condoms are sold. For answers to common questions and other information about this condom, check out the [FC2® website](#) [4] and [Planned Parenthood](#) [5]. For more information about other barrier methods of contraception, take a look at the [Condoms](#) [6] category in the [Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health](#) [7] archives.

Hope this helps!

Alice!

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