

Intrauterine Contraceptives (IUC, IUD, or IUS)

What are intrauterine contraceptives (IUC)?

An IUC is a small, soft, T-shaped device with a nylon string attached to it (see Figure 1). It is put in the uterus by a healthcare provider to help prevent pregnancy.

The IUC prevents pregnancy by stopping the egg and sperm from meeting. A woman can't get pregnant if the sperm and egg don't meet.

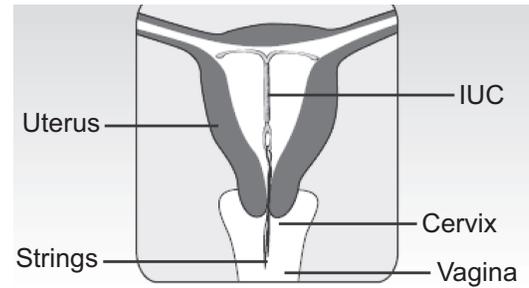


Figure 1

There are 2 types of IUC (copper and hormonal). They work in different ways to help prevent pregnancy.

Copper

This intrauterine device (IUD) has a copper wire wrapped around it. The IUD:

- thickens the mucous in the cervix, so it is harder for the sperm to get to the egg
- slows the sperm movement, so it is harder to get to the egg

Depending on the type of copper IUD, it can help prevent pregnancy for 3 to 10 years.

Hormonal

This intrauterine system (IUS) has a hormone (levonogestrel) wrapped around it that is slowly released into the uterus. The IUS:

- thickens the mucous in the cervix, so it is harder for the sperm to get to the egg
- changes the lining of the uterus to stop a fertilized egg from growing inside the uterus
- slows the sperm movement, so it is harder to get to the egg
- may stop the ovaries from releasing an egg

The IUS can help prevent pregnancy for up to 5 years.

How well do IUC work?

- 8 to 9 out of 10 women will get pregnant in one year if having intercourse without birth control.
- The copper IUD is **99.1 percent** effective in preventing pregnancy.
- The hormonal IUS is **99.8 percent** effective in preventing pregnancy.
- An IUC doesn't protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.
- Use a condom **every time** you have sex (vaginal, oral, anal) to lower your risk of STIs and HIV.

How do I start using IUC?

Before you get an IUC, get checked for STIs or other vaginal infections.

The IUC is put in (inserted) by your healthcare provider. Check the strings **every** month to see if your IUC is still in the right place. Your healthcare provider will teach you how to feel for the strings when your IUC is inserted.

The copper IUD protects you from pregnancy as soon as it is inserted.

If your hormonal IUS is inserted on:

- day 1 to 7 of your period, it works right away to prevent pregnancy
- any other day, you need an extra form of birth control (e.g., condoms, abstinence) for **7 days**

What are the benefits of an IUC?

- An IUC can help prevent pregnancy for 3 to 10 years (depending on the type).
- If you want to get pregnant, your healthcare provider can take out your IUC at any time.
- If you can't use birth control with estrogen, you can use an IUC.
- The copper IUD may lower your risk of cancer of the uterus.
- The hormonal IUS may make your periods lighter or you might even stop having periods. It might also make your period cramps better.

How will an IUC affect my period?

The copper IUD may cause:

- more bleeding and cramping with your period
- light bleeding or spotting between periods

If you use the hormonal IUS, you may have:

- spotting for 3 to 6 months after it is inserted
- much lighter periods after 3 to 6 months
- no period (after 2 years, 50 percent of women stop having a period, this is not harmful)

What are the side effects of an IUC?

With the hormonal IUS, there is a chance (especially in the first 3 months) that you may have:

- headaches
- acne
- tender breasts
- mood changes

What are the disadvantages of having an IUC?

There is a 2 to 10 percent chance of the IUC falling out. This happens most often in the first year. This risk is greater if:

- the IUC was inserted right after you had a baby
- you have had an IUC fall out before
- you have never been pregnant

It is rare to get pregnant while using an IUC. If you do get pregnant with an IUC, there is a higher risk of:

- a pregnancy outside the uterus (ectopic pregnancy)
- miscarriage

The risk of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) may be higher during the first month with an IUC.

In rare cases, an IUC can make a hole in the wall of the uterus when it is being inserted. If this happens, you may need a minor surgery to take it out.

I am thinking of getting an IUC, what do I need to tell my healthcare provider?

If you are thinking of getting an IUC, tell your healthcare provider if you:

- are pregnant or think you might be
- have an STI
- have ever had PID
- have an allergy to copper
- have breast, cervix, or uterine cancer
- have irregular vaginal bleeding or don't have your period

If I have an IUC, when do I need to contact my healthcare provider?

Contact your healthcare provider if you have an IUC and you:

- think you are pregnant
- have heavy vaginal bleeding
- have lots of abdominal cramping
- can't find your strings or the strings are longer or shorter
- think you have been exposed to an STI
- have pelvic pain or vaginal discharge with or without a fever or chills
- have pain with sex or your partner can feel your strings during sex
- have any questions or other problems with your IUC

Did You Know

- You have the right to make the decision to have sex or not.
- Plan ahead and decide to protect yourself to lower your risk of pregnancy, STIs, and HIV.
- It is important to talk with your partner about how you can protect each other.
- You can get pregnant as soon as you have your IUC removed.
- You can contact your healthcare provider anytime to remove your IUC.
- An IUC can be expensive, but the longer you use it, the more cost-effective it is.

Websites

www.myhealth.alberta.ca

www.sexualityandu.ca

www.teachingsexualhealth.ca

www.albertahealthservices.ca and search for Sexual and Reproductive Health

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call Health Link Alberta at 403-943-LINK (5465) in the Calgary area, 780-408-5465 in the Edmonton area, or 1-866-408-LINK (5465) toll-free.

This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.