

BODY & SOUL

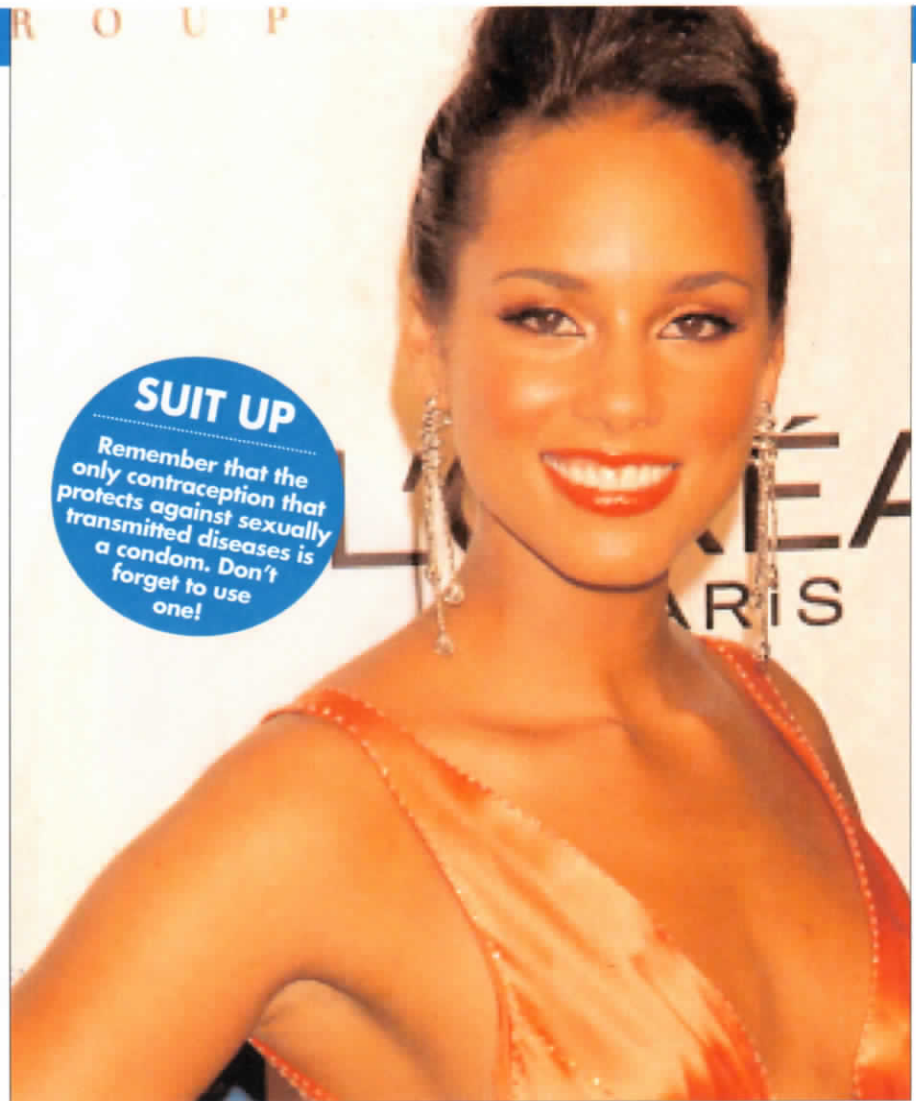
BIRTH CONTROL BASICS

How to figure out what's right for you

Whether you're looking to avoid getting pregnant or you want to regulate your cycle, there are a lot of options when it comes to contraception — and many questions you may need answered. For example, does the pill make you gain weight? Is the patch safe? Is the sponge effective? Since broaching the subject with your gynecologist while you're lying down and spread-eagle never seems quite right, we asked the experts for you.

THE PILL

The birth control pill, which stops ovulation through a combination of estrogen and progesterin, is one of the most common forms of contraception in the U.S. (the other most common choices are condoms and female sterilization). The pill is a popular choice because it has been tried and tested for more than 40 years, and it offers benefits other than preventing pregnancy: It regulates your period (and makes it lighter); it reduces menstrual symptoms; and it reduces the risk of ovarian and uterine cancer. What's more, almost all low-dose pills (which is what most pills on the market are) alleviate acne, says Dr. Maureen Paul, chief medical officer of Planned Parenthood of New York City. And no, you won't



SUIT UP
Remember that the only contraception that protects against sexually transmitted diseases is a condom. Don't forget to use one!

Alicia Keys has joined with MTV to get the message out about safe sex.

automatically put on pounds while on the pill. "Studies have not shown a difference in weight gain between women who are taking a low-dose pill and women who are not," says Dr. Paul.

Sounds great, right? Well, there are some risks. "Rarely, the pill can cause blood clotting, heart attack, stroke or liver tumors, due to the estrogen in the pill," says Dr. Paul. For most women, this is not a problem, but if you have high blood pressure or cholesterol, or diabetes, talk with your doctor about other options. "It's particularly dangerous to be on a hormone contraceptive with estrogen if you're over 35 and smoking," says Dr. Mary Jane Bovo, an ob-gyn and author of *A Child Betrayed*. Also keep in mind that some women do better on certain pills than others. "Different individuals metabolize hormones differently," says Dr. Paul. "One patient may have side effects on one pill, while another patient may not. So there may be a little trial and error in finding the brand for you."

THE PATCH

The Ortho Evra patch, which was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2001, is the only contraceptive patch out there.

It works like the pill in that it stops ovulation through estrogen and progesterin. What's different is the way it's delivered. Instead of taking the hormones in pill form, the patch delivers continuous levels of hormones through your skin. All you have to do is put the patch on and remember to change it once a week. What are the risks? The FDA has issued a warning stating that women using the patch may be exposed to more hormones than they are with the pill. And there have been news reports citing cardiovascular side effects with the patch. But this should not be cause for panic, say both Dr. Paul and Dr. Philip Darney, chief of obstetrics and gynecology.

"Women should rely on themselves when it comes to birth control," says *Sex and the City* author Candace Bushnell.



During her "Intellectual Intercourse" concert, Alanis Morissette preached safe sex.

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gy at San Francisco General Hospital. "Although we've only had a few years of experience with the patch, the evidence so far doesn't suggest that the risks or benefits are any different than with the pill," says Dr. Darney. "The vascular complications that were reported were at just about the same rate as you'd expect from birth control pills." To figure out what's right for you, talk with your doctor.

THE SHOT

There is one brand of contraception, Depo-Provera, that comes in the form of a shot. You simply go to your doctor's office every three months to get your injection of progestin (it doesn't contain estrogen). The best part about this is that you only have to think about birth control every three months — and your periods are supposed to stop, too. The disadvantages, however, are numerous: About 70 percent of women gain weight on Depo-Provera. It can also cause irregular bleeding and reduce bone density, and once you go off it, it can take up to 18 months for your cycle to return to normal.

THE IUC

Intrauterine contraceptives (IUCs), also called intrauterine devices (IUDs), are small flexible appa-



Julia Louis-Dreyfus' *Seinfeld* character wondered if her dates were "sponge-worthy."

rates that are put into the uterus to prevent pregnancy. A clinician inserts it at an office visit, and it stays there until she removes it. IUCs contain either progestin or copper, which immobilizes sperm and changes the lining of the uterus to prevent implantation. A major advantage of IUCs is that they last for five to 10 years, so you won't have to worry about birth control for quite a while. Plus, they are extremely effective. "IUCs are more effective than sterilization but completely reversible," says Dr. Darney. Why don't more women use them? "IUDs have gotten a bad rap," says Dr. Paul. Adds Dr. Darney: "Years ago, studies showed that there was a higher risk for infertility, ectopic pregnancy and infection with intrauterine contraception. But those were badly designed studies and badly designed intrauterine contraceptives that are not on the market anymore." The drawbacks: Some women get more cramps and bleeding with copper IUCs; and IUCs can't be used if you currently have a pelvic infection. But if you're in a monogamous relationship (that means you have a low risk of infection) and you want to prevent pregnancy, this is a good option, says Dr. Darney. "It's important for women to know that the IUD is a very safe method," adds Dr. Paul. **OK!**

FEATURE BY RACHEL RABKIN

ASK RACHEL

Our health director answers your top questions



DEAR RACHEL Is there a vaccine that prevents cervical cancer?

● It looks like there will be one soon. Researchers have been working for years to develop a vaccine that blocks infection from the two strains of HPV (human papillomavirus) that cause 70 percent of all cervical cancer cases. HPV is a very common sexually transmitted disease — about 20 million Americans have one or more strains of the virus. Some strains don't cause symptoms, while other strains cause genital warts. The high-risk strains can cause precancerous cells or cervical cancer. In the latest trials, the vaccine was shown to be 100 percent effective at protecting against HPV 16 and 18, two of the most common cancer-causing HPV strains. The vaccine has yet to be approved by the Food and Drug Administration, so it may not be available until 2006 or later. "Eventually the vaccine will be a crucial tool in combating cervical cancer, but it is only the first step in eradicating HPV worldwide. Other strains of the virus must also be targeted," says Dr. Mark DeFrancesco, an ob-gyn and chief medical officer for Women's Health Connecticut. In the meantime, you should still be sure to see your ob-gyn for routine Pap smears and HPV screenings.

DEAR RACHEL I smoke light cigarettes because I figure they're safer than regular ones. Is this true?

● That logic is as foggy as the smoke from a cigarette. Why? While light cigarettes do contain less nicotine than regular cigarettes, nicotine is not what causes diseases such as lung cancer and emphysema. "The delivery system — a cigarette full of hundreds of toxic chemicals that are inhaled along with nicotine — causes disease," says Virginia Reichert, director of the Center for Tobacco Control at North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System. What's more, people tend to smoke more light cigarettes and inhale more deeply to get the nicotine from light cigarettes than they do with regular cigarettes, says Reichert, which results in the inhalation of a lot of extra harmful chemicals. So if you want to reduce your risk of disease, don't switch to light cigarettes. Don't light up at all.

IF YOU HAVE A HEALTH OR FITNESS QUESTION, EMAIL askrachel@ok-magazine.com OR WRITE TO: ASK RACHEL, OK! MAGAZINE, 475 5TH AVE., NEW YORK, NY 10017

These answers are not intended to substitute for individual professional care.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE THEY?

"Nearly 50 percent of pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended. It's either because couples aren't using contraception, they aren't using it correctly or the birth control method fails," says Dr. Paul. Here's how effective various options are when they're used correctly (perfect use) and less-than correctly (typical use).

METHOD:	PERFECT USE:	TYPICAL USE:
PILL	99.7%	92%
PATCH	99.7%	92%
IUC	99.7%	99.7%
SHOT	99.7%	97%
DIAPHRAGM	94%	84%
SPONGE	91%	84%
CONDOMS	98%	85%

Note: "Always check with your doctor to see if the medicine you're taking interferes with your birth control method," says Dr. Bova.

TO PROTECT AGAINST PREGNANCY AND STDs...



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HEALTH BITE

EXERCISE MADE EASIER

You may not need to work so hard at your next trip to the gym. A study in the journal *Chest* shows that working out at a moderate intensity (the level of a brisk walk) may be enough to improve your cardiovascular health. How much exercise is enough? "As little as 12 miles of brisk walking per week is sufficient to improve fitness," says Brian Dusch, lead author of the study. Note: For more fitness results — like weight loss — you'll need to increase your time and/or intensity level.