



Cuddle time shouldn't mean birth-control stress.

Whoops! We're Having a Baby!

Every year, a surprising number of moms get pregnant—even though they were using birth control. Here's how to avoid the most common missteps. BY MICHELLE CROUCH

With two daughters and a son, 37-year-old Mindi Brewster, of Ardmore, Oklahoma, felt her family was complete. But one morning when they were on vacation, she went to take her birth-control pill—and panicked. Sliding the pack out of its sleeve, she saw it was in the case upside down. She realized that without paying attention to their color she'd taken a week of placebo pills instead of the active pills at the beginning of the pack.

Just three weeks later, Brewster found out that she was pregnant.

Each year, about 3 million American women get pregnant without planning

to—and they're not just teenagers. Women ages 30 to 34, including many who are married with kids, make up about a third of the country's unintended pregnancies, experts say. And here's a scary statistic: Almost half the women were using contraception when they conceived. If most birth-control methods are 97 to 99 percent effective, how could that be?

Turns out many women are either using their method incorrectly or inconsistently, doctors say. And while more women depend on the Pill than any other form of birth control, it's actually one of the toughest methods to use because you can't forget to take

it. "Research shows that it's difficult for people who take any type of medicine every day to remember it," says Beth Jordan, M.D., medical director of the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals. "That's why doctors are encouraging women to consider longer-acting, reversible contraception such as the IUD or the new progestin implant, called Implanon."

Of course, some unplanned pregnancies are going to happen no matter how diligent women are. Brewster, for instance, got pregnant even though she technically swallowed a pill every day. Happily, she feels her 2-year-old son, Bo, is a blessing. "In all

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those years of taking birth-control pills, I'd never screwed up before," she says. "Then I did, and we ended up with a brother for my older son—and I actually feel like I won the lottery."

But for some women, a surprise pregnancy can be devastating, or unsettling at the very least. In order to help you stay in control, we asked doctors how to avoid the biggest mistakes that couples make.

THE PILL

How it works In a traditional pill pack, the active pills contain two hormones, estrogen and progestin. The estrogen keeps your ovaries from releasing an egg, and the progestin thickens cervical mucus to help prevent sperm from entering your uterus.

Failure rate with perfect use
0.3 percent

Real-world failure rate
8 to 15 percent

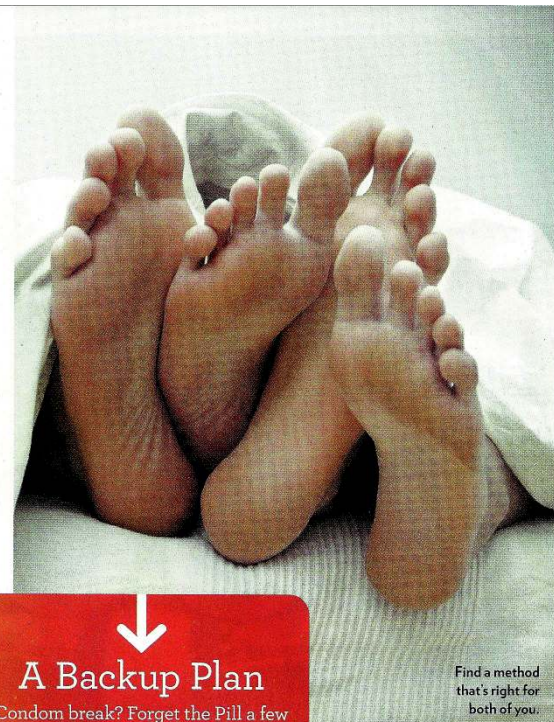
Biggest mistake Missing the first pill in the pack. "After you have taken the placebo pills for seven days, your body is ready to ovulate," points out Marjorie Greenfield, M.D., associate professor at University Hospital Case Medical Center, in Cleveland. "Even if you miss just one day, you can ovulate and get pregnant."

How to maximize effectiveness

- Consider a 24-4 pill pack, which has only four days of placebos. If you forget the first or second pill, you'll have been hormone-free for fewer days, so you'll be less likely to ovulate. Or try an extended-cycle pill, in which you get your period every three months. Since you're taking placebos only four times a year, you minimize your risk.

- If you're up to 24 hours late in taking a pill, take two at the same time. Missed two pills in a row? Use a second form of birth control such as condoms for a week, recommends Dr. Greenfield.

- Buy your next pack as soon as you start the placebo pills. Doctors say some women get pregnant because



Find a method that's right for both of you.

A Backup Plan

Condom break? Forget the Pill a few days in a row? Many docs advise keeping emergency contraception, aka the morning-after pill, on hand to prevent ovulation or fertilization. Designed to be taken within 120 hours after unprotected sex or contraceptive failure, the tablets contain the same hormone found in birth-control pills and are available over the counter.

they're late getting to the pharmacy.

- If you miss a period, start your next pack anyway unless an OTC test confirms that you are pregnant.

Occasionally you may skip a period if you've been using the Pill a long time.

- When you start a new medication, always tell your doctor that you're on the Pill, and ask if you need a backup method. Certain medicines and supplements (such as the antibiotic rifampin and St. John's wort) may reduce the effectiveness of the Pill.

- Make taking the Pill part of another daily routine, such as brushing your teeth and washing your face each morning.

INTRAUTERINE DEVICE (IUD)

How it works A T-shaped device that the gynecologist inserts into your uterus, an IUD prevents sperm from reaching the egg and thins the uterine lining. There are two types of

IUDs: ParaGard, which is made out of copper and lasts for ten years, and Mirena, which releases a small amount of progestin and lasts for five years.

Failure rate with perfect use
0.2 to 0.6 percent

Real-world failure rate
0.2 to 0.8 percent

Biggest mistake Not checking for the device's string each month to make sure that it's in place. In rare cases, it can fall out or perforate the uterus and move elsewhere in the body.

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How to maximize effectiveness

- If your doctor doesn't insert many IUDs, ask him to refer you to a more experienced care provider.
- Be sure to wait at least a month after you've had a baby before getting an IUD inserted. Studies show that it's more likely to come out if it's put in right after childbirth.
- Have a follow-up visit a month after your IUD is inserted to make sure it's still in place. Ask your doctor to show you how to check for the string.
- If you can't feel the string or it's shorter than it was last month, use a backup method and call your doctor for an exam. If she can't find the string, you may need an ultrasound to see if the IUD is still in place.

CONDOM

How it works It prevents sperm from entering your body at all.

Failure rate with perfect use
4 to 5 percent

Real-world failure rate 15 percent

Biggest mistake Waiting too long to put it on. Your partner should do it as soon as he's erect—and definitely before his penis gets close to your

vagina because most men leak semen before they ejaculate. "A single drop of semen has more than a thousand sperm, and any one of them can get you pregnant," explains Mary Jane Minkin, M.D., clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Yale University School of Medicine.

How to maximize effectiveness

- Use a contraceptive cream, foam, or jelly inside your vagina, which decreases the failure rate to 2 percent.
- Leave a quarter-inch at the top of the condom to hold the semen, or use one with a built-in reservoir.
- Open the package carefully.
- Check the expiration date.
- Use only approved, water-based lubricants. Petroleum jelly, lotions, and oils can dissolve latex.
- Don't keep condoms in a back pocket, a billfold, or a car's glove compartment for an extended period of time.

VAGINAL RING (NuvaRing)

How it works A thin, flexible ring that you insert into your vagina, it continually releases estrogen and

Sponge News for Moms

The Today sponge, once a popular over-the-counter birth-control choice for women, is now back on store shelves. First introduced in 1983—and immortalized by a *Seinfeld* episode in which Elaine hoarded her stash—it was taken off the market in 1995 after manufacturing problems (not due to safety or effectiveness concerns). The new sponge is the same as the original: It's a soft, round, polyurethane device that prevents pregnancy by releasing nonoxonyl-9, a sperm-killing chemical. Many women like it because it's hormone-free as well as easy to get and use. But it's also less effective than many other birth-control methods. Although the real-world failure rate is 13 to 16 percent (and 9 to 11 percent with perfect use), it's 27 percent for women who've had vaginal deliveries—probably because they have a larger vagina and cervix. If you want to try it, be sure to follow these key tips.

1 Before you insert it, wet it thoroughly and squeeze it until it looks sudsy. This is important because the water activates the spermicide.

2 Leave the sponge in for at least six hours after intercourse. "If you pop it right out, sperm will still be hanging around, and they can sneak up into the cervix," Dr. Minkin says.

progestin to prevent pregnancy. You leave the ring in for three weeks in a row and then remove it for a one-week break.

Failure rate with perfect use
0.3 percent

Real-world failure rate 8 percent

Biggest mistake Not putting a new ring in one week after removing the last one (even if you still have your period). Some women take the ring out before intercourse (although doctors say it's fine to leave it in) and forget to reinsert it. During the first two weeks, if the ring has been out of your body for more than three hours, your hormone levels drop and you could ovulate. If that happens, either reinsert the ring or insert a new ring, and use a backup method for the next seven days in a row.

How to maximize effectiveness

- Before using the first time, have your doctor watch you insert it to make sure you're doing it correctly.
- Don't use a pack that's more than four months old—after that point, the rings start to lose their effectiveness.
- If you leave it in during intercourse, check afterward to make sure it's still there. "It can get caught on the penis during sex, and it's actually so small and flexible that no one notices," says Garrick Leonard, M.D., assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Weill Cornell Medical College, in New York City.

CONTRACEPTIVE PATCH (Ortho Evra)

How it works The patch releases estrogen and progestin through the skin in order to prevent pregnancy. You stick on a new patch once a week for three weeks and then go without one for a week, at which point you'll get your period.

Failure rate with perfect use
0.3 percent

Real-world failure rate 8 percent

Biggest mistake Forgetting to put on a new patch after your off week. If you're even a single day late, your hormone levels will drop and you could end up ovulating.

How to maximize effectiveness

- Don't use the patch if you weigh more than 176 pounds; studies have found it's less effective, possibly because too much of the hormone gets absorbed by body fat.
- It's wise to use a backup method during your very first week.
- To help you remember to put a new one on at the right time, associate it with something you do weekly, such as watching your favorite TV show.
- Always check that your patch is in place after exercising or swimming. It shouldn't fall off, but if it does (and it's off for more than 24 hours), put a new one on immediately and then be sure to use a backup birth-control method for the next seven days.
- Keep a second patch on hand, or ask your doctor to write you an extra prescription that you can fill just in case the patch ever comes off.

DEPO-PROVERA

How it works A progestin-only injection that you get every three months, it works quite similarly to the Pill to prevent pregnancy.

Failure rate with perfect use
0.3 percent

Real-world failure rate 3 percent
Biggest mistake Missing the shot or having it late because you can't get to the doctor's office in time.

How to maximize effectiveness

- If you don't get your first injection within the first seven days of your period, always use a backup method of protection for two weeks.
- Always schedule your injection appointments toward the end of 11 weeks going into 12 weeks so that there's some leeway built in, says Vanessa Cullins, M.D., vice president of medical affairs at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. That way, if you have to reschedule your appointment, you'll still be able to get your shot on time.
- Make sure you count 12 weeks between injections instead of three months. Since some months are actually five weeks long, you could end up unprotected. □

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