

Contraception - condoms for women

The female condom is designed to fit all women and is suitable for all ages. It offers women and men an alternative to the male condom. Studies have shown that, if used correctly, the female condom is effective in both preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

The female condom is available from Family Planning Victoria's clinics, some pharmacies and other sexual health clinics.

The female condom

The female condom is a prelubricated sheath that fits loosely inside the vagina. It has a soft removable ring, which helps insert it and keep it in place. A large flexible ring stays on the outside, covering the opening of the vagina (vulva) and giving added protection.

The female condom can only be used once. When used correctly, it works about as well as the diaphragm, the other female barrier available in Australia. However, as with the diaphragm, getting used to inserting and using the female condom might take some practice.

Advantages of the female condom

The advantage of the female condom is that it's a barrier method of contraception under the woman's control. It's 95 per cent effective if used properly, but allowing for mistakes, is only around 79 per cent effective.

Other advantages include the following:

- It decreases the risk of STIs.
- It can be inserted up to eight hours before having sex.
- It's soft and flexible, so it doesn't hurt to insert or remove.
- It's made from polyurethane (not latex), which conducts heat, so sex can feel more sensitive and pleasurable.
- It's strong and odourless and can be used with any type of lubricant (water or oil-based).
- It can be used when a woman has her period.
- A male partner doesn't have to have a full erection.
- After ejaculating, a male partner doesn't need to withdraw immediately.

Disadvantages of the female condom

Studies have found the following problems can be associated with the female condom:

- It tends to hang loosely from the vagina.
- It makes a rustling sound during sex.
- It can be pushed up into the vagina.
- The penis might enter the vagina outside the condom.

An alternative to the male condom

Research has shown a general satisfaction with the female condom from both men and women. Around 50 per cent of women and men are happy with the method, with most finding it acceptable, easy to use and comfortable. Less than 50 per cent of couples found it more acceptable than male condoms.

Some men like the female condom because it's not constricting and doesn't fit tightly around the penis. Some men prefer it, as they're unable to maintain an erection while putting on a male condom.

Other types of contraception

There are a number of contraceptive choices available in Australia. Speak with your doctor or healthcare provider about your options. The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships. It's important to weigh up the benefits and possible negative effects of each method and think about your current and future needs.

Protect against STIs

It's important to practise safer sex. The female condom is a barrier method that decreases the risk of STIs for both women and their partners. Other types of barrier protection include male condoms and dams (a thin piece of latex placed over the anal or vulval area during oral sex). Male condoms can be used for oral, vaginal and anal sex with other contraceptive methods to help prevent the spread of infections.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or 1800 013 952
- Action Centre (for young people aged under 25) Tel. (03) 9660 4700 or 1800 013 952
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
- Community health centre
- Victoria AIDS Council/Gay Men's Health Centre Tel. (03) 9865 6700 or 1800 134 840
- Education and Resource Centre at The Alfred. Tel. (03) 9076 6993
- The Centre Clinic, St Kilda Tel. (03) 9525 5866
- Ballarat Community Health Centre Tel. (03) 5338 4500
- Bendigo Community Health Tel. (03) 5434 4330
- Geelong Sexual Health Clinic Tel. (03) 5226 7254
- Clinic 35 Wodonga Tel. (02) 6022 8888
- STD/AIDS Clinic Traralgon Tel. (03) 5173 8111

Things to remember

- The female condom is an effective method of contraception that's within the woman's control.
- It can only be used once. If used more than once, it's not as effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy or protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).
- Like all barrier contraceptives, the effectiveness of the female condom very much depends on correct and consistent use.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Family Planning Victoria

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.