
Contraception - intrauterine devices (IUD)

Summary

- Intrauterine devices (IUDs) are small contraceptive devices that are inserted into the uterus (womb) to prevent pregnancy.
 - The two types available are the copper IUD and the hormonal IUD (sold as Mirena™).
 - Both are among the most effective methods of contraception and can stay in place for five to ten years, depending on the type.
 - IUDs, both copper and hormonal, do not provide protection from sexually transmissible infections (STIs). The best way to reduce the risk of STIs is to use barrier protection such as condoms with all new sexual partners.
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What is an IUD?

An intrauterine device (IUD) is a small contraceptive device that is put into the uterus (womb) to prevent pregnancy. The two types available in Australia are the copper IUD and the hormonal IUD (Mirena™). The copper IUD is designed to stay in place for up to 10 years and the hormonal IUD (Mirena) for five years. Both can easily be removed sooner, if needed.

Copper IUD

The copper IUD is a small, T-shaped, plastic and copper device. It constantly releases a small amount of copper into the uterus. The copper IUD can also be used for emergency contraception instead of the emergency contraceptive pill ('morning after pill').

Hormonal IUD

The hormonal IUD is a small, T-shaped, plastic device, sold as Mirena™ in Australia. It slowly releases a hormone (progestogen) into your uterus. Progestogen is similar to the hormone produced by the ovaries.

How effective are IUDs?

Both copper and hormonal IUDs are more than 99 per cent effective at preventing pregnancy.

How do I use an IUD?

Your doctor or nurse will write you a script and you can get the IUD from your pharmacy. Sometimes you can buy a copper IUD from the clinic providing the IUD insertion.

The IUD is inserted inside your uterus by a trained doctor or nurse. It has a fine nylon thread attached to it which comes out through the cervix (opening to the uterus). If you feel high up inside your vagina, you can check that the thread is there and know the IUD is still in place. Because it is high up in the vagina the thread cannot be seen.

It is good to make a record of the date when you had the IUD inserted. You will need to make sure it is taken out before it expires (five or ten years, depending on the type, after being inserted).

Your partner might be able to feel the IUD string during sex, but it rarely hurts them.

How much does an IUD cost?

The hormonal IUD prescription is covered by a Health Care Card in Australia. It costs around \$6.50 if you are a Health Care Card holder and around \$40.00 if you are not.

The copper IUD is not covered by a Health Care Card and may cost around \$70–120 outside a public hospital setting.

The overall cost of the procedure will vary depending on whether you attend a private or public provider. If you

don't have a Medicare card it, will be more expensive.

Advantages of IUDs

Advantages of copper or hormonal IUDs include:

- They are more than 99 per cent effective in preventing pregnancy.
- They last for a long time – Mirena can last for five years, and the copper IUD can last for ten years.
- They are safe to use if you are breastfeeding.
- No medications stop them from working.
- They provide another contraceptive choice if you have difficulty taking the hormone oestrogen. (The combined pill and the vaginal ring contain both oestrogen and progestogen.) The hormonal IUD only contains progestogen and the copper IUD has no hormones.
- Once they have been put in, you don't need to do anything more apart from checking the thread each month after your period to ensure it has not moved out of the correct position.
- The device can be taken out at any time by an appropriately trained doctor or nurse.
- Your chance of getting pregnant will go back to normal as soon as the copper or hormonal IUD has been taken out.

Advantages of hormonal IUDs include:

- Most users have no vaginal bleeding at all, or a light regular period.
- Periods may be less painful.

Advantages of copper IUDs include:

- They are a choice for those who do not want to use hormonal contraception.
- They are a very effective method of emergency contraception.

Are there any side effects from using the hormonal IUD?

Possible side effects when using the hormonal IUD include:

- When it is first inserted some users have period-type cramping that usually settles after a few days.
- Sometimes the IUD can come out. This is more common in the first three months of it being inserted.
- Your period will change. Spotting or frequent bleeding is common in the first three to six months. By six months around 95 per cent of users will have a light regular period or no bleeding at all (this is not harmful to the body).
- You may experience tender breasts, headaches, skin changes and mood changes. These side effects nearly always settle with time. The hormonal IUD has not been shown to cause weight gain.

Are there any side effects from using the copper IUD?

Possible side effects when using the copper IUD include:

- Spotting or frequent bleeding in the first three months. This nearly always settles with time and your regular bleeding pattern will return.
- Heavier periods.

Can the IUD cause any serious health problems?

In about 1 in 500 users, a small hole in the wall of the uterus (womb) may be created while the IUD is being inserted. The IUD can move through the hole and sit in the wrong place. If this happens, keyhole surgery is required to have the IUD removed.

Around 1 in 300 users get an infection when the IUD is first inserted. This is usually successfully treated with antibiotics.

It is very unlikely to get pregnant when using an IUD. If you do get pregnant with an IUD in place, there is a higher chance of **ectopic pregnancy**. This means that the pregnancy may settle in the fallopian tubes (pathway of the egg to uterus).

When is an IUD not a good option?

An IUD might not be a good option for you if you have:

- a uterus that is not the usual shape
- a current **pelvic infection**.

The hormonal IUD might not be a good option for you if you have:

- been treated for **breast cancer**
- severe **liver** disease.

The copper IUD might not be a good option for you if you have:

- **heavy periods**
- **low iron levels**
- **endometriosis**.

What happens if I get pregnant while I'm using an IUD?

If you become pregnant while you are using an IUD it is important that you see a doctor or nurse as soon as possible and have the IUD removed. The doctor or nurse will also need to rule out a pregnancy in your fallopian tubes (ectopic pregnancy).

If the IUD is removed, there will be no harm to the pregnancy and you can choose to continue or terminate the pregnancy (have an **abortion**). If the IUD is not removed and you continue with the pregnancy, there is a high risk of losing the pregnancy or delivering the pregnancy early.

Can I use an IUD after I've had a baby?

You can have an IUD inserted straight after you give birth. If it is not inserted straight after you give birth, then you need to wait at least four weeks. IUDs are safe to use if you are breastfeeding.

What if I'm using an IUD and I want to become pregnant?

An IUD can be removed at any time by a doctor or a nurse. Your fertility will quickly return.

Other types of contraception

There are many contraceptive methods available in Australia. When choosing the method of contraception that best suits you, it can help to talk to a doctor or nurse about your options. Different methods may suit you at different times in your life.

A doctor or nurse can give you information about:

- the benefits and risks of using various methods of contraception
- how well each method works
- the possible side effects
- how easy it is to use
- how much it costs
- how each method meets your current and future needs.

Other methods include the **contraceptive implant or injection**, the **vaginal ring** or the combined oral **contraceptive pill**.

IUDs do not give protection from STIs

Neither type of IUD gives protection from **sexually transmissible infections (STIs)**. It is important to practise safer sex, as well as to prevent an unintended pregnancy.

The best way to lessen the risk of STIs is to use barrier methods such as condoms for oral, vaginal and anal sex with all new sexual partners. Condoms can be used with IUDs.

Where to get help

- Pharmacist
- **Family Planning Victoria** – comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services for people of all ages Tel. **1800 013 952** or **(03) 9257 0100**
- **Family Planning Victoria Action Centre** – comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services for people of all ages, with an afternoon drop-in clinic for people under 25 years of age Tel. **(03) 9660 4700** or **1800 013 952**
- **1800 my options (1800 696 784)** can provide information on the phone about contraception services
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Many community health services and some public hospitals will have a family planning clinic, a sexual health clinic or a women's health clinic providing contraception
- Private clinics offering abortion also offer contraceptive services
- **Melbourne Sexual Health Centre** Tel. **(03) 9341 6200** or **1800 032 017**

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