Contraception - vasectomy

Summary
- A vasectomy is an operation that prevents sperm travelling from the testicles to the penis.
- It is done by cutting the tubes that allow sperm to leave the testicles.
- This process is known also known as male sterilisation, or 'the snip'.
- Vasectomy is 99 per cent effective at preventing pregnancy.
- If you have a vasectomy, your sex drive, production of sex hormones and ability to reach orgasm will not be affected.
- It takes around three months from the time of the procedure for a vasectomy to begin working. It is important to have a sperm test to check for this.

What is a vasectomy?
Vasectomy is minor surgery which cuts the tubes that carry the sperm from the testicles to the penis. This method of contraception is sometimes also called sterilisation or 'the snip'.

How effective is a vasectomy?
Vasectomy is over 99 per cent effective at preventing pregnancy. It is considered to last forever (it is permanent).

However, it takes around three months from the time of the procedure for a vasectomy to begin working (that is, for no sperm to be present in the ejaculated semen). It is important to have a sperm test to check this.

If you have unprotected sex before you are sure if the vasectomy worked, your partner may become pregnant. It is recommended that you and your partner continue to use another form of contraception until you are sure that the vasectomy worked.

It is very uncommon for a vasectomy to stop working.

Is a vasectomy right for me?
Vasectomy is a safe, effective, permanent method of contraception.

If you and your partner have completed your family or have decided not to have children, then having a vasectomy may be a contraceptive choice to consider. Talk to your partner – be sure that you have made this decision together. If you think you may want to proceed, talk to your GP or contact Family Planning Victoria for more information.

Vasectomy may not be the right contraceptive choice for you if you are relatively young and do not have children, and if it is possible that you might decide you want children later.

In some cases a vasectomy can be successfully reversed, but the success of this procedure is not guaranteed.

What happens when you have a vasectomy?
Most people who have a vasectomy have it done using local anaesthetic, but it can also be done using general anaesthetic. The procedure takes approximately 15–30 minutes.

A vasectomy can be done using a scalpel or a no-scalpel technique. Using the scalpel technique, a small cut of 1–2 cm is made on each side of the scrotum to access the tubes that carry sperm out of the testicles.

Using the no-scalpel technique, a sharpened instrument is used to pierce the skin over the tubes, making an opening in the skin of about 1 cm.

Subsequent steps in the vasectomy are the same for each method, as follows:
Once the tubes are located by the doctor, they are cut and a small piece of tissue is removed. The ends of the tubes are then sealed with a stitch or using diathermy (heat). Sometimes the surgeon will place surrounding tissue between the two ends of the cut tubes, to increase the chance of the vasectomy working.

The recovery time from scalpel and no-scalpel techniques is the same. Both types are equally effective at sterilisation.

How does a vasectomy work?

A vasectomy works by stopping the sperm travelling through the tubes from the testicles (where the sperm are made) to the penis.

As semen is mostly made up of fluid that is produced outside of the testicles, the amount of semen you ejaculate should not change. However the semen will no longer contain any sperm.

If the vasectomy is successful, then there should be no sperm present in your semen around three months after the procedure.

In one in five men, it can take longer for the sperm to clear. You will need to continue sperm tests every few months until you get the ‘all-clear’.

Where can I get a vasectomy?

You can get a vasectomy done in a vasectomy clinic, in a hospital as day surgery, or sometimes in a GP clinic. Some vasectomy providers do not need a referral from your GP – you can just call and make an appointment. Contact your local vasectomy clinic for more information.

If you prefer, you can ask your GP for advice, or a referral to see a specialist. Some GPs also perform vasectomies in their clinic.

Before having a vasectomy your health professional will arrange a pre-procedure consultation to discuss the procedure with you, its advantages, risks and recovery period. This may be on the same day as the procedure, or further in advance.

What are the advantages of having a vasectomy?

Vasectomy:

- is very effective
- can be low cost compared to purchasing other contraceptive methods
- is a quick and simple procedure
- is permanent (lasts forever)
- does not affect your ability to enjoy sex or reach orgasm
- allows your partner to stop taking other types of contraception to prevent pregnancy.

Are there any side effects from having a vasectomy?

After a vasectomy side effects may include:

- bruising and lumps at the wound site
- infection at the wound site
- pain (usually just for a few days)
- scarring at the wound site.

Can a vasectomy cause any serious health problems?

Sometimes pain can last for months after a vasectomy, but this is rare.

What happens if my partner gets pregnant after I’ve had a vasectomy?

If the vasectomy fails, it is safe for your partner to continue the pregnancy or to have an abortion.
What if I have a vasectomy and my partner and I want a child?

You can have a vasectomy reversal procedure, but the procedure does not always work and you may not regain your fertility.

Depending on the length of time since having the vasectomy and the age of the female partner, you may consider going straight to assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as IVF, to give the best chance of getting pregnant.

You can consider storing your sperm in a sperm bank before having a vasectomy as ‘insurance’, in case you change your mind about having a child.

The testicles continue to make sperm after a vasectomy, even though the sperm cannot travel to the penis. If you did not store any sperm before the vasectomy, sometimes it is possible to retrieve sperm from the testicles using a needle, and then perform IVF.

What else should I know about a vasectomy?

Vasectomy does not protect you from sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Vasectomy clinic
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or freecall 1800 013 952

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

Family Planning Victoria