

OVER-THE-COUNTER CONTRACEPTIVES

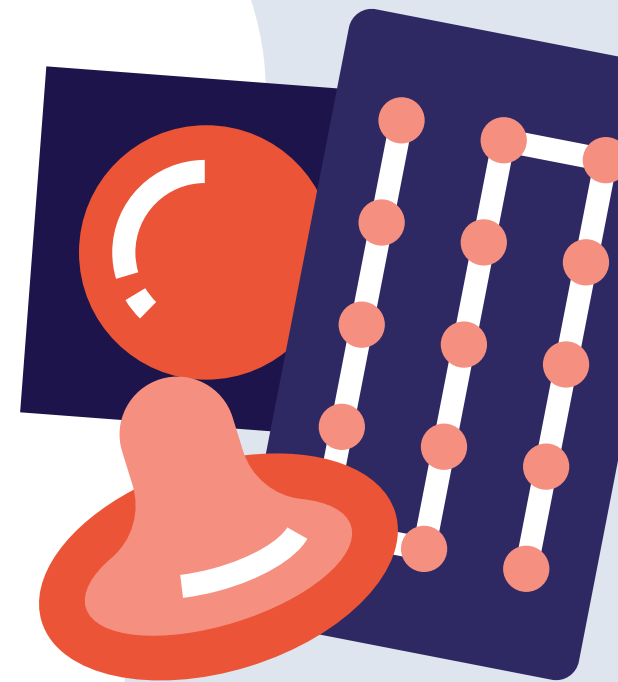
February 2025

As a youth-serving provider, you play a crucial role in educating young people about their options for preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). By understanding the contraceptive options that are available over the counter (OTC), how they work, and their effectiveness in preventing pregnancy, you can help youth make informed decisions about their sexual health and equip them with the tools to protect their well-being.

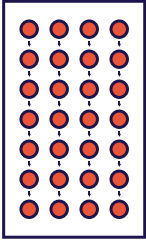
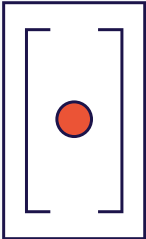
OTC contraceptives are sold in stores, retail pharmacies, and online without a prescription or age requirement for their purchase. OTC contraceptives, which include condoms, spermicides, and certain hormonal pills, have been approved and authorized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) because they are shown to be safe and effective in preventing pregnancy. These products come with simple and clear instructions that make correct use easier. Because of their availability and accessibility, OTC contraceptives offer young people practical and effective options to prevent pregnancy and STIs.

There is no single contraceptive that is right for everyone. The best contraceptive is the one that each individual chooses freely, considering their needs, values, and preferences. In addition to OTC contraceptives, there are other safe and highly effective contraceptives offered by healthcare providers and family planning clinics that may be more suitable choices. Encourage youth to talk with their healthcare providers about contraceptives they are considering or have chosen to use. Young people can learn about the full range of contraceptive options from medically accurate websites (e.g., from [FDA](#) and [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)) and by asking a healthcare provider.

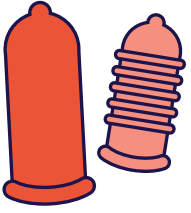
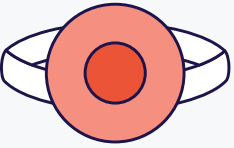
Finally, despite their accessibility and availability, young people may encounter barriers to buying OTC contraception because they are embarrassed or cannot afford them. They might feel awkward about walking into a store and purchasing condoms or pills, especially if they have to ask a staff member to get an OTC contraceptive that is kept behind the counter or locked in a cabinet. Remind young people that their health is more important than this embarrassment and that they shouldn't be embarrassed for taking responsibility for their health. OTC contraceptives purchased in stores, pharmacies, and online can range in cost from about \$10–\$50, depending on what you are purchasing. There are family planning clinics throughout the country that offer OTC and other contraceptives for free or low cost. Youth can use these online directories to find a family planning clinic nearby: [Title X Family Planning Clinic Locator](#) and [Planned Parenthood Health Center Locator](#) .



TYPES OF OTC CONTRACEPTIVES

Type of Contraceptive	Description and Use	Where to Get Them	Chance of Pregnancy with Typical Use	Benefits/Notes
 OTC Birth Control Pill (Opill)	- Pill (norgestrel, 0.075 mg) that must be taken at the same time every day to prevent pregnancy. - Opill is the only oral contraceptive pill approved by FDA for OTC access. - Opill works by preventing the release of an egg, preventing sperm from reaching an egg, and thinning the uterine lining.[†]	- Available at most pharmacies, supermarkets, convenience stores, online retailers, and family planning clinics. - Often found in the family planning or feminine care sections.	About 7% with typical use	Does not protect against STIs or HIV.
 Emergency Contraception (EC)	- Single pill (levonorgestrel, 1.5 mg) that must be taken as soon as possible within 72 hours (3 days) after unprotected sex. - There are several brands of OTC EC (Plan B One-Step; Take Action; My Way, My Choice). - EC works primarily by stopping or delaying release of an egg.	- Available at pharmacies, some supermarkets, online retailers, and family planning clinics. - Often found in the family planning or feminine care sections.	If taken within 72 hours after unprotected sex, 7 out of every 8 women [†] who would have gotten pregnant will not become pregnant.	- Offers a safe and effective way to prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex, contraceptive failure (like a condom breaking), or sexual assault. - Does not protect against STIs or HIV.

[†] According to [FDA](#), the effectiveness of the EC pill (levonorgestrel 1.5 mg) in preventing pregnancy among women who would have gotten pregnant is based on one large study. Other studies have found lower effectiveness rates.

Type of Contraceptive	Description and Use	Where to Get Them	Chance of Pregnancy with Typical Use	Benefits/Notes
 External (Male) Condoms	- Thin barrier that covers the erect penis during sex. - External condoms are made of latex (most common), plastic (polyurethane), synthetic rubber (polyisoprene), or natural membrane (lambskin). - External condoms work to prevent pregnancy by stopping sperm from getting into the vagina and reaching an egg. - External condoms can be used for vaginal or anal sex.	- Available at most pharmacies, supermarkets, convenience stores, online retailers, and family planning clinics. - Often found in the personal care or family planning sections.	About 13% with typical use²	- Latex condoms are the best method for protecting against some STIs and HIV. - Plastic or synthetic rubber condoms also protect against some STIs and HIV and are good for people with latex allergies. - Lambskin condoms have tiny pores and do not protect against HIV or other STIs. - Condoms can be used with other methods (e.g., pills, intrauterine devices, birth control sponges, or spermicides) for added protection against pregnancy.
 Birth Control Sponge	- Small sponge that is placed inside the vagina before sex. - The sponge works by preventing sperm from entering the uterus and reaching an egg and by slowing the movement of sperm.	- Available at some pharmacies, specialized sexual health stores, online retailers, and family planning clinics. - They may not be as commonly stocked as other OTC contraceptives.	About 17% with typical use²	- Provides immediate protection. - Does not protect against STIs or HIV. - Can be used with other contraceptives (e.g., pills, intrauterine devices, or condoms) for added protection against pregnancy.

Type of Contraceptive	Description and Use	Where to Get Them	Chance of Pregnancy with Typical Use	Benefits/Notes
 Spermicides	• A chemical that must be placed deep inside the vagina before sex (like inserting a tampon). • Spermicides come in various forms (gel, cream, foam, suppository, film). • Spermicides work by slowing the movement of sperm and preventing them from reaching an egg.	• Available at most pharmacies, some supermarkets, online retailers, and family planning clinics. • Often found in the family planning or feminine care sections.	About 21% with typical use ²	• Do not protect against STIs or HIV. • Can be used with other contraceptives (e.g., pills, intrauterine devices, or condoms) for added protection against pregnancy.

TIPS FOR USING OTC METHODS

It's important to remind young people to read through the package insert that comes with any OTC contraceptive method and to follow all instructions for correct use. The insert provides important information on how to use the OTC contraceptive correctly, how soon after using or placing it they are protected, potential side effects, and what to do if they have any questions or concerns.

Contraceptive	Tips for Best Use	Where to Find More Information
OTC Birth Control Pill (Opill)	• Opill starts working 48 hours after you take the first pill. A backup contraceptive like condoms must be used if you have sex within the first 48 hours after starting the Opill. • Take the pill every day at about the same time. A delay of more than 3 hours can reduce the pill's effectiveness in preventing pregnancy. • If someone misses a dose or is late taking the pill, they should take it as soon as they remember and use a backup contraceptive method (such as condoms) for the next 48 hours.	• FDA: Opill Information • RHNTC: Opill Resource List 
Emergency Contraception (EC)	• Take the EC pill (levonorgestrel 1.5 mg) as soon as possible within 72 hours (3 days) after unprotected sex. • The EC pill will not work if a person is already pregnant; it will not affect an existing pregnancy. • The EC pill can be taken up to 5 days after unprotected sex, but it will be less effective if taken after 72 hours. • If someone needs EC between 72 hours (3 days) and 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sex, there is a more effective, prescription EC pill available through a family planning clinic or healthcare provider.	• CDC: Emergency Contraceptive Pills

Contraceptive	Tips for Best Use	Where to Find More Information
External (Male) Condoms	• Check expiration date before use. • Don't use oil-based lubricants. Use water-based or silicone-based lubricants. • Plastic (polyurethane) condoms break more often than latex condoms. • To prevent ripping or tears, do not use more than one external condom at a time and do not use with an internal condom. • More dos and don'ts from CDC.	• CDC: How to use an External Condom • CDC: Condom Use: An Overview
Birth Control Sponge	• Wet the sponge with water to activate the spermicide. • The sponge can be inserted up to 24 hours before sex. • The sponge needs to stay in place for at least 6 hours after sex but no longer than 30 hours total.	• FDA: Sponge with spermicide
Spermicides	• Insert spermicide into the vagina before intercourse. • You must wait 10–15 minutes after insertion before the spermicide becomes effective. • Spermicides are effective for a limited length of time (1 hour). • Reinsert spermicide if indicated by the instructions, especially if sex occurs more than one time.	• CDC: Spermicides

CONCLUSION



Youth have access to a variety of OTC contraceptive methods, providing them with pregnancy prevention options to meet their immediate or longer-term needs. As a youth-serving provider, you play a vital role in guiding young people toward immediate solutions and helping them obtain professional advice. By helping youth understand the range of contraceptive options available you help them make well-informed and safe decisions about their reproductive health. To learn about best practices for talking with youth about contraception and for incorporating information about contraception into your program, we encourage you to refer to the tips in [Discussing Contraception and Abstinence with Young People](#) and guidelines for quality counseling and care in [Providing Quality Family Planning Services in the United States: Recommendations of the U.S. Office of Population Affairs \(Revised 2024\)](#) [↗](#).

RESOURCES

- Family and Youth Services Bureau: [Discussing Contraception and Abstinence with Young People](#)
- Family and Youth Services Bureau: [Sexually Transmitted Infections – Get the Facts](#)
- Planned Parenthood: [Birth Control](#) 
- CDC: [It's Your Future. You Can Protect It.](#)
- CDC: [Know Your Condom DOs & DON'TS](#)
- OASH – Office of Women's Health: [Birth Control Methods](#)
- OASH – Office of Women's Health: [Emergency Contraception](#)
- OASH – Office of Population Affairs: [Clinic Locator | HHS Office of Population Affairs](#)
- OASH – Office of Population Affairs: [Providing Quality Family Planning Services in the United States: Recommendations of the U.S. Office of Population Affairs \(Revised 2024\)](#) 

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1. Opill Tablets. Accessed September 26, 2024 from https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/drugsatfda_docs/label/2017/017031s035s036lbl.pdf
2. Bradley SEK, Polis CB, Micks EA, Steiner MJ. Effectiveness, safety, and comparative side effects. In: Cason P, Cwiak C, Edelman A, et al, eds. Contraceptive Technology. 22nd ed. Jones & Bartlett Learning; 2023: 130–131.

This infographic was developed by RTI International and its subcontractor partners under contract #HHSP233201500039I Task 3 with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau.

Suggested Citation: Albert, J., Fowler, C., Suellentrop, K., Dickinson, D., & Hull, K. (2025). *Over-the-counter contraceptives*. Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau.