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Family planning/contraception methods

3 July 2025

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Key facts

- Among the 1.9 billion women of reproductive age (15–49 years) worldwide in 2021, 1.1 billion have a need for family planning; of these, 874 million are using modern contraceptive methods, and 164 million have an unmet need for contraception(1).
- Access to contraception supports the fundamental human right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of children. It also provides significant health benefits by preventing unintended pregnancies and reducing related health risks.
- Many different contraceptive options are available to prevent unintended pregnancy, including both temporary (reversible) and permanent methods.
- Only one contraceptive method, condoms, can prevent both pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Overview

Family planning allows people to attain their desired number of children and determine the spacing of pregnancies. It is achieved through use of contraceptive methods and the treatment of infertility(2). Access to family planning supports people's right to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. It plays a vital role in achieving broader development goals by promoting health, advancing gender equality, and

supporting education and economic opportunity, contributions that align directly with SDG 3.7, which calls for universal access to sexual and reproductive health care, including family planning.

Impact

Family planning offers numerous benefits. By helping individuals avoid unintended pregnancies and plan births, it reduces pregnancy-related health risks, particularly for adolescent girls. Beyond health, family planning enables women to pursue education and employment opportunities, helping families and communities thrive. With 874 million women now using modern contraceptives, access to family planning supports public health, advances gender equality, strengthens health systems, and promotes economic development. An additional 70 million women are projected to gain access by 2030(3).

Barriers

Despite progress, many people still face challenges in accessing family planning services. These include limited availability of certain methods, particularly in low-resource or rural settings, and barriers related to age, income, or marital status. Fear of side effects, misinformation, and social or religious opposition may discourage use. In some cases, health services are of poor quality or providers may discourage certain methods due to bias. Gender inequality also plays a role, with some individuals needing their partner's consent or fearing stigma.

Contraceptive methods

There are many different contraceptive methods, each with their own advantages and effectiveness. All contraceptive methods included in the WHO guidelines have undergone rigorous testing for safety, efficacy, and effectiveness, and are considered safe for most individuals.

Some, like implants, intrauterine devices (IUDs), and sterilization, are highly effective and long-lasting. Others, such as pills, injections, patches, and vaginal rings, are used regularly and work well when taken correctly. Barrier methods like condoms are effective at preventing pregnancy, if used correctly. Condoms are the only method that also protects against sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. People may also use fertility awareness-based methods or withdrawal, which are less reliable.

Choosing the right method depends on each individual's health, preferences, and needs. Health worker advice can help people identify appropriate contraceptive methods.

Infertility

Infertility, defined as the inability to conceive after 12 months of regular unprotected sex, affects around 1 in 6 adults during their lifetime. It can stem from many causes, including infections, medical conditions, or environmental and lifestyle factors. Both men and women can experience infertility, yet women often bear the larger burden of social blame. In some settings, this can lead to stigma or emotional distress. Treating infertility is part of a comprehensive approach to family planning. Importantly, modern contraceptive methods do not cause infertility.

WHO response

Achieving universal access and the realization of sexual and reproductive health services will be essential to fulfil the pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that “no one will be left behind”. It requires intensified support for contraceptive services, including through the implementation of effective government policies and programmes.

WHO is working to promote access and use of contraception by producing evidence-based guidelines on safety and service delivery and on ensuring human rights in contraceptive programmes. WHO assists countries to adapt and implement these tools. Additionally, WHO participates in developing new contraceptive technologies. We lead and carry out research to improve how people access and receive contraceptive information and services

(1) United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Family Planning 2022: Meeting the changing needs for family planning: Contraceptive use by age and method. UN DESA/POP/2022/TR/NO. 4

(2) UNTERM - Family planning

(3) United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). World Family Planning 2020 Highlights: Accelerating action to ensure universal access to family planning (ST/ESA/SER.A/450)