

THE VAGINAL CONTRACEPTIVE RING

What is the vaginal ring? It is a clear, flexible, plastic, non-absorbent contraceptive ring that is inserted into the vagina once every month and works in a similar way to the pill. It releases low doses of 2 female hormones (oestrogen and progesterone) to prevent pregnancy by preventing ovulation (release of an egg).

How effective is the vaginal ring? If used according to instructions, it is 99.3% effective. If you are presently not using any other form of contraception, it should be inserted between Day 1-5 of the menstrual cycle (Day 1 being the first day of bleeding), but additional barrier method contraception (eg. condoms) is required for the first 7 days.

How do I use it? It is inserted into the vagina in the same way a tampon is inserted. Simply squeeze the ring between the two fingers to compress it and slip it into the vagina, pushing it in until it feels comfortable. It is designed to sit in the upper, more spacious part of the vagina, which is insensitive to touch. If you cannot feel it, then you know it is in the right position. The vaginal muscles will keep it in place, even during exercise and sex. Exactly 3 weeks later, the ring is removed and then a new ring is inserted 7 days later. Most women will experience a withdrawal bleed (period) during the ring-free week, which usually starts 2-3 days after removal of the ring. You don't need to clean or check the vaginal ring nor remove it for sex. It is unlikely your partner will be aware of the ring during intercourse. Although it is not necessary, the ring may be removed during sex if desired. If removed, it should be reinserted within 3 hours to maintain its contraceptive effect. It may be washed with cold water (not hot water).

Why use a vaginal ring? The vaginal ring is a once-a-month contraceptive method (rather than daily). This reduces problems with memory when some women forget to take a pill every day. The vaginal ring releases a consistently low level of hormones that are directly absorbed into the blood stream. When taking the oral contraceptive pill, many factors can make the pill less effective, eg. vomiting and diarrhoea, that are avoided when using the vaginal ring. Hormone levels in the pill are higher to account for lost hormone absorbed by the liver before getting to the bloodstream. The vaginal ring contains a lower dose than the pill because it gets absorbed directly into the bloodstream, bypassing the liver. In this respect, side effects occur less often. The bleeding pattern tends to be more predictable than the pill because of the consistency of hormone absorption. Using a vaginal ring also provides a discreet form of contraception.

What are the disadvantages? – The vaginal ring is more expensive at an approximate cost of \$28 per month (the cost of 1 ring). You must remember to remove/ reinsert a new ring at the correct intervals. It does not protect against

sexually transmitted infections and requires a prescription from the doctor.

How does the vaginal ring affect periods? Periods tend to become shorter, regular and lighter. It also tends to stop painful periods. Nearly all women experience a normal withdrawal bleed during the ring-free week. A few women may experience irregular bleeding or spotting during the first 3 weeks that the ring is being used.

Can the vaginal ring break, get lost or fall out? It is flexible but sturdy – it will not break or split inside the vagina. It does not dissolve and won't cause irritation. It is specifically designed to mould to the shape of your vagina so it stays in place once inserted. It cannot "be lost" in your body as the entrance to the uterus is too small for it to pass through. The muscles at the bottom of the vagina hold it in, so it is unlikely to fall or be pushed out. If this does happen, it probably indicates that the ring was not inserted high enough initially.

How hygienic is the vaginal ring? It is made of smooth, non-absorbent plastic, so no bacteria can grow on it and it does not cause unpleasant odours. You may be worried because you have heard that leaving a tampon in the vagina too long may cause toxic shock syndrome. This does not happen with the vaginal ring. It can be left in place safely for 3 weeks. It does NOT however, protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Tampons may be used with the vaginal ring. However, most women experience their withdrawal bleed during the ring-free week and usually do not need to use tampons while it is inserted. Be careful not to remove the ring when removing a tampon.

What if I forget to remove it after 3 weeks and forget to insert a new one? If you forget to remove the vaginal ring between 3 and 4 weeks, you don't have to do anything differently. Simply remove it, have your usual one-week ring-free interval and then re-insert a new ring. If it has been in for exactly 4 weeks, remove it and insert a new one immediately. You will not get a period that month. If it has been in for longer than 4 weeks, or you remove it at any time for longer than 3 hours, insert it as soon as you remember and use another form of contraception for 7 days (eg. condoms). Emergency contraception may be necessary at any other times and is available directly from the pharmacy without prescription. It is best taken within 24 hours after unprotected intercourse.

Inside each vaginal ring pack there is small blue booklet. In the back of this is a page of stickers you may place in your diary or calendar to remind you to insert or remove the vaginal ring. If you would like to receive a reminder SMS message to your mobile phone, visit the website www.moderncontraception.com.au (password: modern)

PTO

Can I delay the onset of a period with the vaginal ring? You can delay your period by inserting a new ring

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immediately after removing the current ring, with NO ring-free week. You will need to replace the ring every 3 weeks, but you may experience some breakthrough bleeding or spotting when you do this. When you wish to have a period, simply remove the ring and insert a new one 1 week later – a period will start usually 2-3 days after removal of the previous ring.

What are the unwanted effects (side effects)?

As with all hormonal contraceptive methods, some side effects that can occur with the vaginal ring include: headache (6.6%), nausea (2.8%), weight increase (2.2%), breast tenderness or enlargement (1.9%), acne (1.1%). Less common side effects are: mood changes, breakthrough bleeding, missed periods, painful menstruation, decreased libido, abdominal pain, migraine, expulsion of the ring, skin changes (chloasma- patchy brown discolouration of the skin), problems during intercourse, feeling of the ring or irritation in the genital area.

A thrombosis sometimes occurs in the deep veins of the legs (deep venous thrombosis- DVT). If this blood clot breaks away from the veins where it is formed, it may reach and block the arteries of the lungs, causing a pulmonary embolism. DVT is a rare occurrence. It can develop whether or not you are using hormones for contraception. It can also happen if you are pregnant. The risk is higher in women who use combined oral contraceptive pill compared to non-users, but not as high as the risk during pregnancy. The risk in women using the vaginal ring is not known, but it is assumed to be similar to other hormonal contraceptives.

Who can use the vaginal ring? It is suitable for most women, particularly for women who prefer not taking a pill every day, have a predictable regular bleeding pattern, have a method that can be stopped easily, and have medical conditions that may benefit – eg. acne, heavy/painful periods, endometriosis, ovarian cysts, premenstrual symptoms.

It MAY NOT be suitable for women who have diabetes, gallbladder disease, obesity, family history of thrombosis and heart attack, migraine headaches which worsen with the vaginal ring or the pill, high blood pressure, for women who smoke, have abnormal vaginal bleeding, the cause of which is not yet known, have chronic constipation or vaginal prolapse (unable to keep vaginal ring in place).

The vaginal ring is NOT suitable for women who are >35 and smoke, have suffered from thrombosis, have had a stroke or heart attack, migraines that cause paralysis of one side of body, have had breast or genital cancer, severe active liver disease, are pregnant or breastfeeding.

What are the special rules to follow?

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Smoking creates a health risk with the pill, and therefore the same rules apply to the vaginal ring - so you should NOT smoke.

Some medications that can reduce the effectiveness of the vaginal ring include antibiotics, herbal remedy St Johns Wort and drugs to treat epilepsy and tuberculosis and HIV. If you are taking antibiotics, continue using the vaginal ring but use another contraceptive method during the antibiotic course and for another 7 days after the course is finished.

- Make sure you tell a doctor if you are using the vaginal ring when other medicine is about to be prescribed.
- Report persistent or heavy bleeding between periods.
- Report any onset of blurred vision, severe headache or pain in the chest or limbs.
- Return for a check up every 6-12 months whilst you are using the vaginal ring.
- Perform breast self-examination regularly and have a smear test every 2 years.
- Remember that the vaginal ring is highly effective, but pregnancy can occur if it is not used according to instructions.
- Recent evidence suggests a small increased risk of pre-menopausal breast cancer where women take the pill for 4 years or more before a first full term pregnancy, but the pill decreases the risk of uterine and ovarian cancers. The same is expected to apply to the vaginal ring but specific studies are not available.

This is a new and exciting contraception for the modern woman.