

THE CONTRACEPTIVE IMPLANT

What is the contraceptive implant? It is a long-acting reversible contraceptive. It is a thin flexible plastic rod that is inserted under the skin of the inside of the upper arm. It is approximately the size of a matchstick (40mm x 2mm). It releases the hormone progesterone and lasts for 3 years. The "mini-pill" also is a progesterone only contraception but the combined oral contraceptive pill contains both oestrogen and progesterone.

How effective is the contraceptive implant and how does it work? It is more than 99% effective. It slowly releases progesterone at a steady rate over 3 years. Progesterone mainly works by stopping ovulation (release of the egg from the ovary). It also thickens the cervical mucus, which stops sperm getting through to the uterus to fertilise an egg. It also makes the lining of the uterus thinner so implantation cannot occur, in case an egg did get fertilised.

How does it get inserted and removed? The doctor will make a small mark on the skin of the inside of the upper inner arm (usually the non-dominant arm). After cleaning the skin with antiseptic the doctor injects the area with a little local anaesthetic so the rest of the insertion is comfortable. This may sting a little. When the anaesthetic has taken effect the doctor will insert the contraceptive implant with the plastic device provided. The whole procedure only takes a few minutes. Once inserted it can be felt, but not easily seen. Make sure your doctor shows you to gently feel the implant in your arm after insertion. Afterwards, a pressure bandage will be put on your arm to minimise bruising. You should keep the area dry and clean for 24 hours then the bandage may be removed. There may be some itchiness over the implant for up to 2 weeks after insertion, most likely due to healing.

It should be inserted within the first 5 days of starting a period (Day 1-5) and is effective immediately if inserted at this time.

To remove the contraceptive implant, some local anaesthetic is again injected underneath the end of the implant and a small incision (2mm) is made in the skin. The end of the implant is then pushed through this incision and removed with some forceps. This may leave a small scar. A bandage is applied for the next 24 hours. It usually takes about 10-15 mins. Incorrect or deep insertion may complicate removal.

It is important to have the contraceptive implant removed after 3 years. After 3 years, it does not stop working immediately but the reliability slowly decreases, and the risk of ectopic pregnancy increases.

The contraceptive implant may be removed at any time and you will return to your previous state of fertility very quickly. A new contraceptive implant may be inserted at the same time an old one is being removed.

What are the advantages?

- You don't have to take a pill every day.
- It lasts for 3 years
- It does not interfere with sex
- It can be used when breastfeeding
- Period pain is less than usual
- Women who cannot take pills containing oestrogen can use it.
- Vomiting and diarrhoea does not affect the contraceptive implant and its effectiveness (unlike the oral contraceptive pill).
- It is totally reversible. No evidence of delay in return to fertility (unlike the contraceptive injection) following its removal.
- It does not increase the risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) according to medical studies.

What are the disadvantages?

- Vaginal bleeding may occur at irregular intervals and bleeding patterns may be unpredictable.
- Some women may stop periods altogether but this is medically safe (20%).
- Weight gain was reported at clinical trials in 6.4% of users.
- Other undesirable side effects may include: acne (14%), fluid retention, headache, breast tenderness, hair loss, mood changes, changes in libido, abdominal pain, painful periods, chloasma (staining of the facial skin) and irritation, pain, itching at the insertion area. Side effects often subside after 3-6 months.
- It does not protect against HIV or other sexually transmitted infections.
- On rare occasions, the contraceptive implant sometimes moves from its original position. This may complicate removal.

Who is NOT suitable for the contraceptive implant?

- If you have a history of blood clots, heart disease, liver disease or take medications for epilepsy and tuberculosis (these drugs may make the contraceptive implant less effective).
- If you have had breast cancer.

How do I get it and how much does it cost? The contraceptive implant is available on prescription only. You will need a consultation with the doctor to assess your suitability to the contraceptive implant. It is subsidised by the Australian government and only costs about \$30. The real cost is approximately \$215. Timing of insertion is important and it requires insertion between Day 1- 5 (day1 being the first day of menstrual bleeding) to ensure you are not pregnant when it is inserted.

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