

Spermicides

Spermicides are a contraceptive method that comes in many forms including foam, cream, gel, film, and suppositories. Spermicides contain the chemicals non-oxynol 9 (N-9) or octoxynol that prevent pregnancy by immobilizing and killing sperm. ***Spermicides are not recommended to be used alone.*** They should be used with another method of contraception, such as condoms.

If you need pregnancy protection, use a spermicide. Do not use a lubricant. Check the box to see that it says it is a contraceptive. Lubricants are products that increase sexual pleasure by making the contact surfaces wet and slippery decreasing friction and possible irritation. Lubricants are not spermicides. ***Lubricants do not provide protection against pregnancy.*** Some lubricants come in forms similar to spermicides, so be sure to read the label before assuming the product is a spermicide. (See the section below on lubricants for information about the important distinction between water-based and oil-based lubricants.)

EFFECTIVENESS

If a couple uses spermicides alone (not using condoms or another method) correctly every time they have intercourse, about 6% of them will become pregnant. The average pregnancy rate is closer to 21% since not all couples use spermicides every time and spermicides are not always used correctly.

Because spermicides kill sperm, scientists initially believed that they would also kill sexually transmitted infections (also called sexually transmitted diseases) such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV. According to the [2002 Centers for Disease Control STI Treatment Guidelines](#), N-9 contraceptives do not protect against these infections and may increase STI exposure risk because spermicides can cause genital irritation.

USING SPERMICIDES

For vaginal intercourse, the spermicide is inserted into the vagina ahead of time. The spermicidal chemicals may cause genital irritation, particularly N-9. If you experience inflammation or a burning sensation, look for a spermicide with octoxynol or a lower amount of N-9. Note: ***Spermicides are not recommended to be used alone.*** They should be used with another method of contraception, such as condoms.

Spermicides are available for purchase without a prescription at area pharmacies. Detailed instructions for use are always included in the packaging. Be sure to read them carefully before you use any of these products. If more than 1 hour has passed between insertion of a spermicide and intercourse, another application of spermicide must be used. For each act of intercourse you should insert another application of spermicide.

Insertion of a spermicide into the rectum, as a means of reducing STI risk, is not recommended because the spermicide can cause irritation of the rectal tissues and can actually increase the risk of STI transmission. For STI protection, always use condoms when having anal sex.

TYPES OF SPERMICIDES

Jellies, Creams, & Gels: Jellies, creams, and gels all have the same level of protection but have different consistencies and textures. All three products will protect you from pregnancy immediately. These spermicides vary in the amount of N-9 they contain, but most have between 1% and 5%. You may want to experiment to find which type of spermicide that suits you and your partner.

Using Jellies, Creams, or Gels: Twist the applicator on to the end of the tube of spermicide and fill the applicator. Untwist the applicator, insert it into the vagina approximately 3 inches and depress the plunger to squirt the spermicide out. The applicator may be washed with mild soap and water, stored in a clean, dry place and used again.

Spermicidal Foam: Spermicidal foam is the same consistency of mousse hair-styling products. Foam has a concentration of N-9 of about 12.5%, which may lead to genital irritation.

Using Spermicidal Foam: Shake the can of foam vigorously for at least 30 seconds. Press the tip of the applicator on the nozzle of the can, press down and fill the applicator. Insert the applicator into the vagina approximately three inches and depress the plunger to squirt the foam out. It will be active immediately. The applicator may be washed with mild soap and water, stored in a clean, dry place and used again.

Vaginal Contraceptive Film (VCF): This spermicide comes as a 2-inch by 2-inch sheet of film with a consistency similar to wax paper. VCF has the highest concentration of N-9, about 28%, which may lead to genital irritation. Use another type of spermicide or another method if you experience irritation.

Using Vaginal Contraceptive Film: Fold it in half and then in half again. Place it on the tip of your index finger and insert the film into the vagina and up near the cervix. You must insert VCF at least 15 minutes before intercourse for it to work effectively. The film will dissolve to a thick gel consistency by absorbing vaginal secretions. Do not place the film on the tip of the penis for insertion as the film will not have adequate time to dissolve and may not end up in the right position.

Suppositories: Suppositories are spermicides in a solid form. Brand names you might see in the drugstore include Encare, Intercept, Koromex, and Semicid. Because suppositories have an N-9 content of 2% to 8%, some women may experience a sensation of warmth or burning as the suppository dissolves. If this is painful or irritating, use another type of spermicide or another method of contraception.

Using Suppositories: Read and follow the directions on the box. You must allow 10 to 15 minutes for the suppository to dissolve into a foamy substance before having intercourse. Suppositories may be somewhat less effective than foam, cream, or gel because it is hard to tell if they have dissolved sufficiently.

(See following page for information about lubricants.)

Spermicides

LUBRICANTS

Lubricants are not spermicides. Lubricants do not provide pregnancy protection. Lubricants are products that increase sexual pleasure by making the contact surfaces wet and slippery decreasing friction and possible irritation. If you need pregnancy protection, use a spermicide, not a lubricant. Some lubricants come in forms similar to spermicides, but they do not offer contraceptive protection. Read the label to be sure you are using a spermicide if you want protection against pregnancy.

Using Lubricants: The only lubricant you should use with latex condoms is a water-based lubricant. *Oil-based lubricants should not be used with condoms.* Oil-based products have oil in them that reacts with latex.

Water-based lubricants have no oil and do not react with latex. Astroglide, KY Jelly, Probe, and Wet are examples of water-based lubricants.

Examples of oil-based lubricants include baby oil, mineral oil, baby oil, vegetable oil, Vaseline, cold creams, and most hand lotions. Mineral oil, a common ingredient of hand lotions, can cause a 90% decrease in condom strength after as little as 60 seconds of exposure, dramatically increasing the chance of leakage or breakage. *Oil-based lubricants should not be used with condoms.*

An easy way to tell the two types of lubricants apart is that oil-based lubricants bead water and are difficult to wash off while water-based lubricants rinse off easily in plain water. If you are not sure, read the label. If you are still not sure, do not use the product as a lubricant.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of gynecological and contraceptive services. You can schedule an appointment with your primary care provider (PCP) or with one of the women's health nurse practitioners for gynecological care and to discuss contraceptive options. All visits to UHS are strictly confidential.

LINKS

To learn more about the different types of spermicides, you can visit:

Planned Parenthood

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/bc/bcfacts18.html#SPERMICIDE>

CDC

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5118a1.htm>