HEALTH BASICS

Vaginal sponge and spermicides

Vaginal sponges and spermicides are non-hormonal products used to lower the chance of pregnancy.

WHAT IT IS
Vaginal products that block or impair sperm

WHERE IT COMES UP
Choosing non-hormonal contraception for penis-in-vagina sex

WHY IT MATTERS
Lowers the chance of pregnancy

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Pharmacist, sexual health service, or reproductive health clinician

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No routine test; pregnancy tests check possible failure

Overview

Vaginal sponges and spermicides are forms of birth control. They are used inside the vagina before penis-in-vagina sex. They do not contain hormones.

A contraceptive sponge is a small, soft, disposable sponge. It sits over the cervix, which is the opening between the vagina and uterus. The sponge contains spermicide and also acts as a physical barrier.

Spermicides are chemicals that make it harder for sperm to move and survive. The most common ingredient is nonoxynol-9. Spermicides may come as gels, creams, foams, films, suppositories, or tablets designed for vaginal use.

These methods do not protect against sexually transmitted infections, or STIs. Condoms are still needed when STI protection is important.

Product availability differs by country. Some products can be bought without a prescription, while others may be difficult to find.

How it works

The sponge works in two ways. It covers the cervix and absorbs some semen. Its spermicide also reduces sperm movement, making it less likely that sperm will reach an egg.

The sponge must be placed high in the vagina so it covers the cervix. It is designed for one-time use and should not be reused. Unlike a diaphragm or cervical cap, it does not need to be fitted by a clinician.

The timing for insertion and removal comes from the product label. For the contraceptive sponge sold in the United States, the instructions say to leave it in place for at least six hours after the last act of sex and not more than 30 hours in total. Other products may have different instructions.

Standalone spermicides are placed deep in the vagina before each act of sex. How long they need to dissolve, how soon sex must occur, and whether another dose is needed are specific to the product. Check the label each time you use a new formulation.

Neither method ends an existing pregnancy. They work only when used before sex that could lead to pregnancy.

Why it matters for your health

Sponges and spermicides offer a non-hormonal option that you control at the time of sex. They may suit someone who wants to avoid daily contraception or cannot use certain hormonal methods.

They are less effective at preventing pregnancy than several other reversible methods, especially with typical use. Typical use includes putting a product in late, placing it incorrectly, removing it too soon, or not applying more spermicide when required.

The sponge is less effective in people who have previously given birth vaginally. Changes to the cervix and vaginal tissues after birth can affect how well the sponge covers the cervix.

Spermicides do not prevent HIV or other STIs. Frequent exposure to nonoxynol-9 can irritate vaginal or rectal tissue. Irritated tissue may make HIV transmission more likely if exposure occurs. Spermicides should not be used as a substitute for condoms or STI testing.

What can go wrong

Pregnancy can occur if the sponge or spermicide is used incorrectly or if the method fails despite correct use. A torn condom, a displaced sponge, sex outside the product's effective

time, or forgetting another application of spermicide can all create a pregnancy risk.

Vaginal irritation may cause burning, soreness, itching, or redness. This can come from nonoxynol-9 or another ingredient. Irritation may affect either partner. Stop using the product and arrange routine advice if discomfort continues.

Urinary tract infections , or UTIs, may occur more often in some people who use spermicides or barrier methods. A UTI affects the bladder or urinary system. Contact a healthcare service if you develop painful urination, frequent urination, or recurring infections.

A retained sponge can happen if it is difficult to reach, tears during removal, or stays in longer than instructed. Seek prompt medical help if you cannot remove it, think part remains inside, or develop unusual discharge, pain, or fever. Do not use tools that could injure the vagina.

Toxic shock syndrome , or TSS, is a rare but serious condition linked to certain bacterial toxins. Sponge labels warn against use during menstruation, soon after childbirth, or in anyone with a previous history of TSS. Follow the restrictions on your product.

Get emergency help if fever occurs with vomiting or diarrhoea, faintness, confusion, severe weakness, or a widespread rash while a sponge is in place or soon after use. Remove the sponge if you can do so easily, but do not delay emergency care.

A severe allergic reaction is also an emergency. Call emergency services for trouble breathing, facial or throat swelling, or collapse.

What you can do

Read the complete label before using a sponge or spermicide. Products differ in how they are prepared, inserted, timed, reapplied, and removed. Do not assume that instructions for one type also apply to another.

You can ask a pharmacist or sexual health service:

Use a condom when STI protection is needed. If you have ongoing irritation, frequent sex, recurrent UTIs, or increased HIV exposure risk, ask about options that do not contain nonoxynol-9.

If the method was not used correctly, came out too soon, or may have failed, emergency contraception may be an option. Emergency contraceptive pills and the copper intrauterine device, or IUD, work within limited time windows. Contact a pharmacist, sexual health service, or reproductive health clinician as soon as possible.

Take a pregnancy test if your period is late. If you do not know when your period is due, a home test is generally reliable at least 21 days after sex that may have led to pregnancy. Repeat the

test or seek clinical advice if the result is negative but your period still does not come.

There is no blood test, scan, or routine examination that confirms a sponge or spermicide worked. If you are concerned about a particular event, record the date of sex, what product was used, and when the sponge was inserted and removed. This information can help a pharmacist or clinician advise you.

- How long before sex this product should be inserted
- Whether another application is needed for each act of sex
- How long it must stay in afterward
- Whether its ingredients are compatible with your condoms
- Whether another method may work better after vaginal birth

Common questions

Does the sponge already contain spermicide?

Yes. A contraceptive sponge contains spermicide as part of the product. Do not add another spermicide unless the sponge instructions specifically say to do so.

Can spermicide be used by itself?

Some spermicides are sold for use alone, but pregnancy is more likely than with many other contraceptive methods. Using a compatible condom as well provides additional pregnancy protection and helps protect against STIs.

Can one sponge cover more than one act of sex?

The US contraceptive sponge label allows repeated sex while the same sponge remains correctly positioned within its stated time limit. Do not remove and reinsert it. Follow the exact label for your product.

Can I use a sponge during my period?

The US contraceptive sponge label says not to use it during menstruation because of the risk of toxic shock syndrome. This restriction concerns the sponge rather than every standalone spermicide.

What if the sponge feels stuck?

Relaxing the pelvic muscles or squatting may make the removal loop easier to reach. Do not use sharp objects or force. Seek prompt care if you cannot remove it or think it has torn.

Can I douche after using spermicide?

Douching is not needed and may wash the product away too soon or irritate the vagina. Follow the label about bathing and vaginal washing after sex.

Do these products affect future fertility?

They do not cause permanent infertility. Their contraceptive effect ends after the product is removed or is no longer active.

Sources

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- National Health Service. Doing a Pregnancy Test . Guidance on the timing of home pregnancy testing.