

NON-HORMONAL COPPER INTRAUTERINE DEVICES (IUDs)

What is the non-hormonal copper intrauterine device (IUD)?

The non-hormonal copper IUD is a small plastic device with copper wire coiled (wrapped) around the frame. It is inserted into the uterus (womb) where it constantly releases a small amount of copper. There are several different non-hormonal IUDs available in Australia.

The copper IUD can also be used for emergency contraception instead of the emergency contraceptive pill ('morning after pill'). Once inserted, it can be left in for 5 – 10 years (depending on the type) and used as an ongoing method of contraception.

How effective are the copper IUDs?

The copper IUDs are more than 99% effective at preventing pregnancy and can last for up to 5 – 10 years (depending on the type). They can be used for contraception until menopause if inserted when you are 40 years of age or older.

If you are using the copper IUD for emergency contraception, you need to use it within 5 days or 120 hours after unprotected sex.

How does the copper IUD work?

IUDs affect the way sperm move and survive in the uterus (womb), stopping sperm from meeting and fertilising an egg. IUDs can also change the lining of the uterus, making it difficult for a fertilised egg to stick to the lining to start a pregnancy.

How do I use the copper IUD?

The copper IUD is inserted inside the uterus (womb) by a trained doctor or nurse. You can choose to have a local anaesthetic or sedation while it is inserted. The IUD insertion takes around 15 minutes but you will be in the clinic for an hour or more.

The IUD has a fine nylon string attached to it which comes out through the cervix (opening to the uterus/womb). The string cannot be seen and it does not hang out of the vagina. If you feel high up inside your vagina, you can check that the string is there and know the IUD is still in place. It is good to do this every month. If the string feels like it is shorter or longer than normal or you cannot feel the string at all, the IUD may have shifted and you should see a doctor or nurse.

When does it start to be effective?

When the copper IUD is inserted (put in) it starts working straight away to prevent pregnancy.

Where can I get the copper IUD?

Your doctor or nurse will provide a script which you can take to the pharmacy, who will sell you the copper IUD. Sometimes you can buy the IUD from the clinic. You will need to return to the clinic to have the IUD inserted.

What stops the copper IUD from working?

The copper IUD may not work if it:

- falls out (remember to check the strings regularly)
- goes into the wrong position
- is left in for longer than 5 – 10 years (depending on the type).

What is good about the copper IUD?

- It is an extremely effective method of contraception.
- Once inserted (put in) you will only need to check the string each month.
- It can last up to 10 years.
- You can use it while breast feeding.
- No medications stop it from working.
- The device can be taken out at any time by a doctor or nurse.
- Once removed your fertility quickly returns to what is normal for you.
- It is a choice for those who do not want to use hormonal contraception.

Disclaimer

This factsheet is for general information purposes only and should not be relied on as medical information. You should seek specific medical consultation for your individual circumstances.

Are there any side effects from using the copper IUD?

- When it is first inserted some users have period type cramping that usually settles after a few day.
- Your vaginal bleeding pattern (period) will change. Spotting can occur in the first 3 months. This nearly always settles with time and your regular bleeding pattern will return. For most users, periods are about 50% heavier.
- Sometimes the IUD can fall out. This is more common in the first 3 months of it being inserted.

Can the copper IUD cause any serious health problems?

- In about 1 in 500 users, the doctor or nurse makes a small hole in the wall of the uterus (womb) while inserting the IUD. The IUD can move through the hole and sit in the wrong place. You would then need keyhole surgery to have it removed.
- Around 1 in 300 users get an infection when the IUD is first inserted. This is usually successfully treated with antibiotics.
- It is very unlikely you will get pregnant when using the copper IUD. If you do get pregnant with a copper IUD, there is a higher chance of ectopic pregnancy. This means that the pregnancy may settle in the fallopian tubes (pathway of the egg to uterus).

Reasons why the copper IUD might not be a good option for you:

- Heavy periods.
- Low iron levels.
- A uterus (womb) that is not the usual shape.

What if I late having my copper IUD changed over or it has expired?

Once the copper IUD is in for more than 5 – 10 years (depending on the type), you can abstain from sex or use condoms until you can have it replaced. If you have unprotected sex and your IUD has been in for more than 5 – 10 years, you might need emergency contraception.

Can I use the copper IUD after I have had a baby?

The copper IUD can be inserted straight after you give birth. If not inserted straight after you give birth, then you need to wait until at least four weeks later. The copper IUD is safe to use if you are breastfeeding.

What if I am using the copper IUD and I want to become pregnant?

The copper IUD can be removed at any time by a trained doctor or a nurse. Your fertility will quickly return to what is normal for you.

What else should I know about the copper IUD?

- The copper IUD does not protect you from sexually transmissible infections (STIs).
- It is good to record the date or enter that date into your phone for when your IUD is due to be removed. You will need to have it taken out before it expires (up to 5 – 10 years after being inserted). You can have a new IUD inserted at the same time the existing one is being removed.
- Your partner might be able to feel the IUD string during sex, but it rarely causes them discomfort.
- Use of the copper IUD for emergency contraception is not an abortion.

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