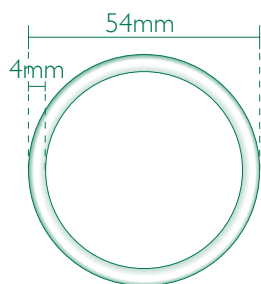


# your guide to the contraceptive vaginal ring

Helping you choose the method  
of contraception that's best for you



# The contraceptive vaginal ring



The contraceptive vaginal ring is a flexible, transparent plastic ring. It's placed in the vagina where it releases two hormones – estrogen and progesterone. These are similar to the natural

hormones produced by the ovaries and are like those used in the combined pill.

## How effective is the vaginal ring?

How effective any contraceptive is depends on how old you are, how often you have sex and whether you follow the instructions.

If 100 sexually active women don't use any contraception, 80 to 90 will become pregnant in a year.

If the vaginal ring is **always** used perfectly, according to instructions, it's over 99% effective. This means that less than one ring user in 100 will

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get pregnant in one year.

If the vaginal ring is **not always** used according to instructions, about nine in 100 ring users will get pregnant in one year.

## How does the vaginal ring work?

The vaginal ring releases a constant dose of hormones into the bloodstream through the vaginal wall. The main way it works is to stop the ovaries from releasing an egg each month (ovulation). It also:

- thickens the mucus from your cervix. This makes it difficult for a sperm to move through it and reach an egg
- makes the lining of the uterus (womb) thinner so it's less likely to accept a fertilised egg.

## Where can I get the vaginal ring?

You can go to a contraception or sexual health clinic, or a general practice. If you prefer not to go to your own general practice, or if they don't provide contraceptive services, they can give you information about another practice or clinic. All treatment is free and confidential. You don't need to have a vaginal or breast examination or cervical screening test when you're first prescribed the vaginal ring.

## Can anyone use the vaginal ring?

Not everyone can use the vaginal ring so your doctor or nurse will need to ask you about your own and your family's medical history. Do mention any illnesses or operations you've had. Some of the conditions which **may** mean you should not use the vaginal ring are:

- you think you might be pregnant
- you smoke **and** are 35 years old or over

- you're 35 years old or over and stopped smoking less than a year ago
- you're very overweight
- you take certain medicines
- you're breastfeeding a baby less than six weeks old (see page 9).

You have now or had in the past:

- thrombosis (blood clots) in any vein or artery or a member of your immediate family had thrombosis before they were 45 years old
- a heart abnormality or circulatory disease including hypertension (high blood pressure)
- heart disease or a stroke
- systemic lupus erythematosus with positive antiphospholipid antibodies
- breast cancer or you have the gene that's associated with breast cancer
- migraines with aura
- active disease of the gall bladder or liver
- diabetes with complications
- you're immobile for a long period of time or use a wheelchair
- you're at high altitude (more than 4,500m) for more than a week.

If you're healthy, don't smoke and there are no medical reasons for you not to use the vaginal ring, you can use it until you're 50 years old. You'll then need to change to another method of contraception.

## What are the advantages of the vaginal ring?

Some of the advantages of the vaginal ring are:

- you don't have to think about it every day –

- you only use one ring a month
- it's easy to insert and remove
- unlike the pill, the hormones don't need to be absorbed by the stomach, so the ring isn't affected if you vomit or have diarrhoea
- bleeding will usually become more regular, lighter and less painful
- it may help with premenstrual symptoms
- it may reduce menopausal symptom
- it improves acne in some people.

## What are the disadvantages of the vaginal ring?

There are some serious side effects (see below Are there any risks?). In addition:

- you may not feel comfortable inserting and removing it
- you may get temporary side effects at first including increased vaginal discharge, headaches, nausea, breast tenderness and mood changes
- breakthrough bleeding and spotting (unexpected vaginal bleeding on days you're using the ring) may occur in the first few months of use
- the vaginal ring doesn't protect you against sexually transmitted infections, so you may need to use condoms as well.

## Are there any risks?

The vaginal ring can have some serious side effects, but these aren't common. For most people the benefits of using the ring outweigh the possible risks. All risks and benefits should be discussed with your doctor or nurse.

- A very small number of ring users may develop venous thrombosis, arterial thrombosis, heart

attack or stroke. If you've ever had thrombosis, you should not use the vaginal ring.

- The risk of venous thrombosis is greatest during the first year that you use the vaginal ring and if any of the following apply to you: you smoke, you're very overweight, are immobile for a long period of time or use a wheelchair, or a member of your immediate family had a venous thrombosis before they were 45 years old.
- There appears to be a slightly higher risk of venous thrombosis in vaginal ring users compared to those using some combined pills.
- The risk of arterial thrombosis is greatest if you smoke, are diabetic, have hypertension, are very overweight, have migraines with aura, or a member of your immediate family had a heart attack or stroke before they were 45 years old.
- Research suggests that users of the ring appear to have a small increased risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer compared to non-users of hormonal contraception, which reduces with time after stopping the ring.
- Research suggests that there's a small increase in the risk of developing cervical cancer with longer use of estrogen and progestogen hormonal contraception.

## See a doctor straight away if you have any of the following:

- pain in the chest, including any sharp pain which is worse when you breathe in
- breathlessness
- you cough up blood
- painful swelling in your leg(s)
- weakness, numbness or bad 'pins and needles' in an arm or leg

- severe stomach pains
- a bad fainting attack or you collapse
- unusual headaches or migraines that are worse than usual
- sudden problems with your speech or eyesight
- jaundice (yellowing skin or yellowing eyes).

If you need to go into hospital for an operation or you have an accident which affects the movement of your legs, you should tell the doctor that you're using the vaginal ring. The doctor will decide if you need to stop using the ring or need other treatment to reduce the risk of developing thrombosis.

### Will I put on weight if I use the vaginal ring?

Research hasn't shown that the vaginal ring causes weight gain. You may find your weight changes throughout your cycle due to fluid retention.

### When can I first start to use the vaginal ring?

You can start using the vaginal ring any time in your menstrual cycle if you're sure you're not pregnant.

If you start the ring on the first day of your period you'll be protected from pregnancy immediately.

You can also start to use the ring up to and including the fifth day of your period and you'll be protected from pregnancy immediately. However, if you have a short menstrual cycle with your period coming every 23 days or less, starting the ring as late as the fifth day of your cycle may not provide you with immediate contraceptive

protection. This is because you may ovulate early in the menstrual cycle. Talk to your doctor or nurse about whether you need additional contraception.

If you start the ring at any other time in your menstrual cycle you'll need to use additional contraception, such as condoms, or avoid sex for the first seven days of using it.

### I've just had a baby. Can I use the vaginal ring?

If you feel comfortable, you can start to use the vaginal ring 21 days after you give birth, if you're not breastfeeding. Starting on day 21 you'll be protected from pregnancy straight away. If you start later than day 21 use additional contraception or avoid sex for seven days.

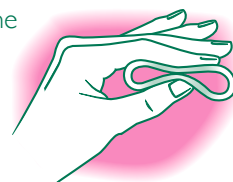
If you're breastfeeding a baby less than six weeks old, the ring may affect your milk production. It's usually recommended that you use a different method of contraception until six weeks after the birth.

### Can I use the vaginal ring after a miscarriage or abortion?

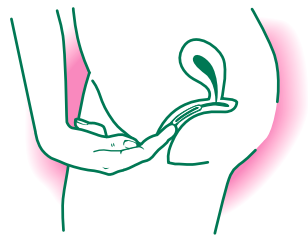
You can start using the vaginal ring immediately after a miscarriage or abortion. You'll be protected from pregnancy straight away.

### How do I insert the vaginal ring?

Your doctor or nurse should advise you on how to insert and remove the vaginal ring. With clean hands, squeeze the ring between your thumb and finger and use one hand to insert it into your vagina. If necessary, spread your labia (vaginal lips) with your other hand. Push the ring into your vagina until it feels comfortable.



It doesn't need to cover your cervix (entrance to the uterus) to work.



### How will I know the vaginal ring is in place?

The ring doesn't need to be in an exact position. Most ring users can't feel the ring. If you can feel it and it's uncomfortable, push it a little further into your vagina. You can check it's still there with your fingers.

There's no danger that the vaginal ring can get lost inside the vagina – it's stopped by the cervix. However, if you're sure it's inside you but you can't feel it with your fingers, see a doctor or nurse.

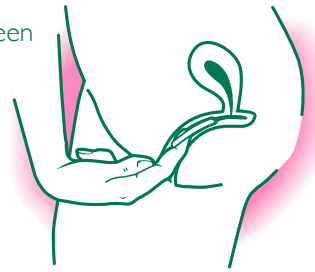
### Will I, or my partner, be able to feel the vaginal ring during sex?

Occasionally, you or your partner might be able to feel the ring during sex. This isn't uncomfortable or unpleasant for most people. The ring is not likely to affect or harm your partner.

### How do I remove the vaginal ring?

Remove the vaginal ring by hooking a finger under

it, or by grasping it between your thumb and finger, and gently pulling it out.



If you experience pain or bleeding when trying to remove the ring, or can't remove it, tell your doctor or nurse immediately.

### How do I use the vaginal ring?

**Weeks 1-3:** The vaginal ring should be left in the vagina for three weeks (21 days). After three weeks remove the ring on the same day of the week that it was inserted.

**Ring-free interval:** Stop using the ring for one week (seven days). This is known as the **ring-free interval**. During this week you get a bleed. You don't have periods when you use the vaginal ring – you have a withdrawal bleed (which doesn't always happen). It's caused by you not taking hormones in the ring-free week.

**New ring cycle:** After the ring-free interval, insert a new ring on the eighth day. You should do this even if you're still bleeding. Continue using the



vaginal ring as you did in the last cycle.

**Disposing of the vaginal ring:** Put the used vaginal ring in the disposal sachet provided and place it in a waste bin. It must not be flushed down the toilet.

## Am I protected from pregnancy during the seven day, ring-free interval?

Yes. You're protected if:

- you used the vaginal ring according to instructions during the last three weeks **and**
- you start the next ring cycle on time **and**
- you're not taking medicines that will affect the ring (see page 15).

## What if I forget to take the vaginal ring out at the end of week three?

### Seven days or less

If the ring has been left in for up to seven days after the end of week three (up to four weeks in total):

- As soon as you remember, remove the ring. Do not put another ring in. Start your seven day, ring-free interval. After the seven days insert a new ring on the eighth day.
- You don't need to use additional contraception and you're protected from pregnancy.

### More than seven days

If the ring has been left in for more than seven days after the end of week three (more than four weeks in total):

- As soon as you remember, remove the ring and insert a new ring immediately.
- You must use additional contraception or avoid

sex until the new ring has been in place for seven continuous days.

- Ask your doctor or nurse for advice if you've had sex in the previous few days and weren't using a condom as you may need emergency contraception.

## What if I forget to put a new vaginal ring in at the end of the ring-free interval?

Insert a new ring as soon as you remember. If you put the new ring in 48 hours or more after your ring-free interval then you may not be protected from pregnancy. Use an additional method of contraception, such as condoms, or avoid sex for the next seven days. If you've had sex in the previous few days and weren't using a condom ask your doctor or nurse for advice as you may need emergency contraception.

## Can the ring fall out of my vagina?

The muscles of your vagina hold the ring in place. Occasionally, however, the ring may come out of your vagina (expulsion), for example if it wasn't inserted properly, during sex or a bowel movement, or while removing a tampon. If this happens often, you may want to consider another method of contraception.

## What should I do if the ring comes out of my vagina for a short time?

The longer the ring has been out of the vagina, the higher the risk of pregnancy. You may also experience breakthrough bleeding. If the ring comes out of the vagina for:

### Less than three hours

- Rinse the ring with cool or lukewarm water

(not hot) and re-insert the **same** ring as soon as possible within three hours.

- You don't need to use additional contraception and you're protected from pregnancy.

### More than three hours in the first or second week of use

- Rinse the ring with cool or lukewarm water (not hot) and re-insert the same ring as soon as possible.
- You must use additional contraception or avoid sex until the ring has been in place for seven continuous days.
- Ask your doctor or nurse for advice if you've had sex in the previous few days and weren't using a condom as you may need emergency contraception.

### More than three hours in the third week of use

Throw the ring away and choose **one** of the following two options:

1. insert a new ring immediately and start a new ring cycle. You may not experience a withdrawal bleed but breakthrough bleeding or spotting may occur; **or**
2. don't insert a new ring. Start your seven day, ring-free interval. You'll have a withdrawal bleed. Insert a new ring seven days from the time the previous ring came out of the vagina. This option can only be chosen if the ring was used continuously for the previous seven days.

In both cases, you must use additional contraception or avoid sex until the ring has been in place for seven continuous days and ask your doctor or nurse for advice if you've had sex in the previous few days and weren't using a condom as you may need emergency contraception.

If you lose the vaginal ring insert a new one and continue with the cycle that you were on.

## What if the ring breaks inside my vagina?

This is very rare and it's unlikely to affect how the ring works. It won't harm you. Remove the broken ring and insert a new one as soon as possible. Continue with the cycle that you were on.

## If I take other medicines will it affect the vaginal ring?

If you're given medicines by a doctor, nurse or hospital always say you're using the vaginal ring. Commonly used antibiotics don't affect the vaginal ring. Medicines such as some of those used to treat epilepsy, HIV and TB and the complementary medicine St John's Wort may make it less effective. These types of drugs are called enzyme-inducers. If you take these medicines, talk to your doctor or nurse about how to use the vaginal ring - you may need to use a different method of contraception.

Treatments for thrush don't affect the effectiveness of the vaginal ring.

## I'm bleeding on the days when I'm using the vaginal ring, what should I do?

This is called breakthrough bleeding. It's very common when you first start to use the vaginal ring and isn't usually anything to worry about. It may take up to three months to settle down. It's important to continue using the ring correctly even if the bleeding is as heavy as your withdrawal bleed.

You can use a tampon while the ring is in place; this isn't harmful. However, try to make sure that



the ring doesn't come out accidentally when removing the tampon.

Bleeding may also be caused by not using the vaginal ring correctly or by a sexually transmitted infection. If it carries on or starts after you've used the ring for some time, seek advice.

## I didn't bleed in my ring-free interval – am I pregnant?

If you used the ring according to instructions and haven't taken any medicines that might've affected the ring (see page 15), then it's very unlikely that you're pregnant. Start your next ring cycle at the right time. If you're worried, ask your doctor or nurse for advice or do a pregnancy test. Using the ring doesn't affect a pregnancy test. Always take a test or speak to a health professional if the ring hasn't been used properly, or if you miss more than one withdrawal bleed. If you do become pregnant, there's no evidence to show that using the ring harms the baby.

## Can I miss out a withdrawal bleed?

Yes. This isn't harmful. Remove the ring after three weeks and immediately insert another without having the seven day, ring-free interval. You may experience breakthrough bleeding but this is nothing to worry about. If you're using the ring correctly you'll still be protected from pregnancy.

## What should I do if I want to change to another method of contraception?

It's easy to change from the vaginal ring to another method of contraception. Get advice from your doctor or nurse. You may need to miss out the ring-free interval or use additional contraception.

## What should I do if I want to stop using the vaginal ring or try to get pregnant?

Ideally, it's easier if you stop using the vaginal ring at the end of the ring cycle and don't insert a new ring after your withdrawal bleed. If you don't want to wait until this time, ask your doctor or nurse for advice because you can risk becoming pregnant if you've had sex recently. If you don't want to become pregnant you should use another method of contraception as soon as you stop using the ring. Your normal periods may not come back immediately. For some people it can take a few months.

If you want to try for a baby it helps to wait for one natural period after stopping the ring before trying to get pregnant. This means the pregnancy can be dated more accurately and you can start pre-pregnancy care such as taking folic acid and stopping smoking. Ask your doctor or nurse for advice. Don't worry if you get pregnant sooner, it won't harm the baby.

## Should I give my body a break from the vaginal ring every few years or so?

No. You don't need to take a break because the hormones don't build up. There are no known benefits to your health or fertility from taking a break.

## How often do I need to see a doctor or nurse?

When you first start using the vaginal ring you'll be given a supply to see how it suits you. After that you should go back to the doctor or nurse to get new supplies and to have your blood pressure

checked. If there are no problems, you can be given a further supply of vaginal rings.

## How do I find out about contraception services?

The Sexual Health Information Line provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is **0300 123 7123**. It's open Monday to Friday from 9am-8pm and weekends from 11am-4pm.

For more information on sexual health visit [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

Information for young people can be found at [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

## Clinics

To find your closest clinic you can:

- use Find a Clinic at [www.fpa.org.uk/clinics](http://www.fpa.org.uk/clinics)
- download FPA's Find a Clinic app for iPhone or Android.

You can find details of general practices and pharmacies in England at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) and in Wales at [www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk). In Scotland you can find details of general practices at [www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot) and in Northern Ireland at [www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)

## Emergency contraception

If you've had sex without contraception, or think your method might've failed, there are different types of emergency contraception you can use.

- An IUD is the most effective option. It can be fitted up to five days after sex, or up to five days after the earliest time you could have released an egg (ovulation).
- An emergency contraceptive pill with the active ingredient ulipristal acetate can be taken up to five days (120 hours) after sex. Available with a prescription or to buy from a pharmacy. ellaOne is the only brand in the UK.
- An emergency contraceptive pill with the hormone levonorgestrel can be taken up to three days (72 hours) after sex. More effective the earlier it's taken after sex. Available with a prescription or to buy from a pharmacy. There are different brands.

Emergency pills are available for free from some pharmacies. Age restrictions may apply.

## Sexually transmitted infections

Most methods of contraception don't protect you from sexually transmitted infections.

Condoms (male/external or female/internal), when used correctly and consistently, can help protect against sexually transmitted infections. If you can, avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called Nonoxinol 9, which may increase the risk of HIV infection.

## A final word

This booklet can only give you general information. The information is based on evidence-guided research from the World Health Organization and The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

All methods of contraception come with a Patient Information Leaflet which provides detailed information about the method. Remember - contact your doctor, practice nurse or a sexual health clinic if you're worried or unsure about anything.



the sexual health charity



[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

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If you'd like information on the evidence used to produce this booklet or would like to give feedback email [feedback@fpa.org.uk](mailto:feedback@fpa.org.uk)

