

sextalk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

factoid

A physician in the time of Charles II is said to have designed a contraceptive device to prevent the king from spawning more illegitimate children. The doctor's name? The Earl of Condom.

Q. How many forms of contraception have been used to date?

A. Defined as the "intentional prevention of conception or impregnation through the use of various devices, agents, drugs, sexual practices, or surgical procedures," contraception is as old as sex itself. And while there is no good estimate on the number of contraceptive forms ever used, most can be categorized under the methods mentioned above.

Today, science has given us many options that are both safe and highly effective, when used properly. But as you might expect, earlier contraceptives weren't always so reliable, let alone appealing.

Four thousand years ago, Egyptians made pessaries (vaginal suppositories) out of elephant or crocodile dung to prevent conception. The alkaline nature of these mixtures is believed to have had some effect in killing or blocking sperm. At about the same time in China, women drank mercury, an early if dangerous form of oral contraception. In ancient Rome, pouches filled with a cat's liver were tied around a woman's left foot during sex to avoid pregnancy. And in cultures who had strong beliefs about the moon's role in fertilizing crops, women would sleep away from the light of the moon, lest they become impregnated by moonbeams.¹

Other methods, by contrast, became the forerunners of effective birth control that we use today. Sea sponges and vinegar or lemon juice were paired in the Mediterranean – an early predecessor of the sponge and spermicide combination. Condoms made of hide, intestine or linen have also been around (the Earl notwithstanding) for a very long time as well.

In fact, some of the oldest forms of birth control seem to be the most timeless, including *coitus interruptus* (the withdrawal method), breastfeeding (since nursing moms are less likely to conceive shortly after childbirth) and abstinence, the surest method of all.

For more information on finding the best alternative for you, search for "contraception" at www.health.arizona.edu. A range of birth control options are available at The Campus Health Service Pharmacy; stop in for over-the-counter products or call 621-9202 to schedule an appointment.

¹ from "History of Female Contraception" by Victoria Nottingham

Have a question? Send it to sextalk@email.arizona.edu

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