

Spermicides

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What are spermicides?

Spermicides are chemicals that stop sperm from moving. They are used to help prevent pregnancy. They are available as vaginal creams, films, foams, gels, suppositories, and tablets. A diaphragm is a contraceptive device that is always used with spermicide. The chemicals (nonoxynol-9 is the only one available in the US), attack the sperm flagella and body, reducing motility. They may also act as barriers preventing the sperm from entering the cervical opening.

Spermicides may be used with condoms for contraception. In the hands of perfect users, pregnancy rates for spermicide and condom used together are less than 1%. In the hands of typical users, pregnancy rates are 5%.

Unfortunately, spermicides used alone for contraception have a relatively high failure rate. The perfect use failure rate during the first year is 15%. The typical use failure rate is as high as 29%. Therefore, they are not recommended as a primary method of birth control. They can be used as a backup method in the case of condom breakage or slippage.

Spermicides do not protect against the transmission of STIs such as HIV, Chlamydia or Gonorrhea. Frequent (two or more times per day) nonoxynol-9 spermicide use may cause tissue irritation that theoretically could increase susceptibility to HIV.

Condoms containing spermicide are no longer recommended as they do not appear to be more effective than the condoms without spermicide.

How is spermicide inserted?

- Inserting person should wash and dry hands
- Spermicide has its greatest efficacy near the cervical opening, deep in the vagina.
- Reapply with each penetrative act or if 60 minutes has passed since sexual intercourse began.
- For creams, foam, and gels: apply less than 1 hour prior to sexual intercourse.
- Foams: shake canister vigorously, fill plastic applicator with spermicide, insert applicator deeply into vagina and depress plunger. It is immediately active.
- Films, suppositories, and tablets: insert at least 15 minutes before sexual intercourse. For films, fold the sheet in quarters, then half again to ease insertion. Place deep in vagina, near the cervix.
- Keep spermicides in cool, dry places
- Bathing and douching within 6 hours after insertion or post-coitally can dramatically decrease effectiveness of spermicides.

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