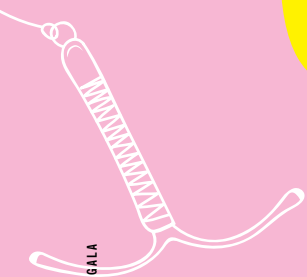
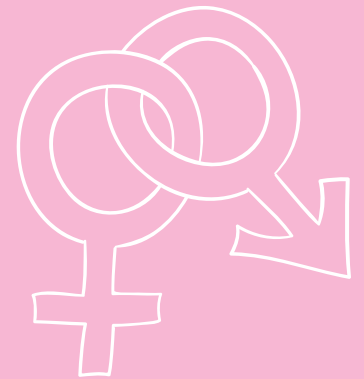
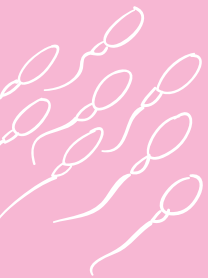
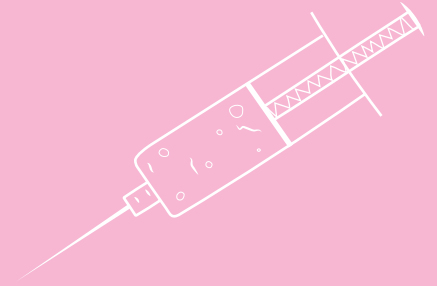


BRING ON THE BIRTH CONTROL



In conservative communities, contraception is often a subject on the off-limits list. No one speaks about sex, let alone any sort of family planning. As a result, many young women are unaware of the various contraception options available, and for the most part, think about sex all wrong. If you're unmarried and sexually active (lower those brows, aunties), it's important to ask questions on practising safe sex. **Shihaam Hassanali** raises her hand.

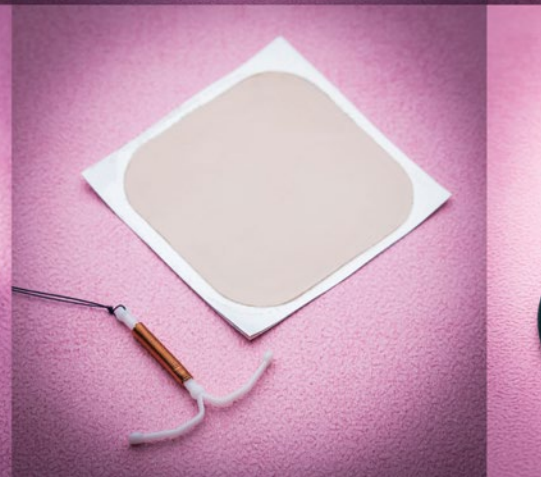


“Say, what do you and hubs use when you’re doing the dirty?” winked Shenali, 22, as she swivelled around in her chair to talk to her colleague. “Shhh! Don’t be so loud!” Ranjula, 35, hissed at her, horrified. She looked anxiously around the room. No one heard Shenali’s question, but she was nervous (not to mention embarrassed) to discuss it. Puzzled, Shenali asked, “Why? Everyone here talks about sex and stuff. I was just curious as to what’s out there.” Ranjula squirmed in her seat and tried to explain to Shenali that in their (mostly) male-dominated office, this subject would be best discussed later. “But men need to know, too, don’t they?” countered Shenali. Rolling her eyes, she went on, “Nevermind, I’ll ask someone else.”

Shenali, like most 20-something-year-olds, is sexually active and wants to know what precautions she should take to avoid catching pesky Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and to not get pregnant. Millennial Lankan women, like Shenali, are significantly more aware of themselves than ever before. They’re far more conscious of what they consume and how they exercise, and this extends to who they partner with and how their relationships pan out. Previously taboo topics are now being discussed openly and fearlessly, and the conversation has gotten more focused around sex and sexual health. Bottom line: We want to know about all the ways sex can be safe, frequent and enjoyable (regardless of whether or not we’re married). Here are the answers you wanted to know. It’s time to own your sexuality.

CONSULT A PROFESSIONAL

If you’ve just become sexually active (or are planning to), it’s highly recommended that you consult a medical professional to determine what form of contraception will work best for you. “A general practitioner, Gynaecologist, a professional at the Family Planning Association (FPA) or a Public Health Midwife (PHM) at your local government clinic should be consulted,” explains Dr. Nilani Kaluarachi, MB ChB (UK), D.R.C.O.G (UK), DFFP (UK). “A detailed history and examination should be done before deciding the appropriate method of contraception. You should then



be counselled on the options, and an informed decision should be made together.” Your doctor ideally should also discuss possible side effects, failure rates, risks, benefits and so on. If it’s not brought up, make sure to ask!

Contrary to mainstream thought, there are plenty of contraceptive options available in Sri Lanka.

HERE'S WHAT'S AVAILABLE AND HOW THEY WORK:

CONDOMS

These typically tend to be the go-to contraceptives, since they are readily available (at all supermarkets) and are relatively intuitive to use (tear packet – slip it on – throw it out). Remember to not reuse a condom (ever, ever, ever), and if it breaks, take the morning-

after pill (see below) to ensure that you don’t get pregnant. Using a condom (even if you’re on another form of birth control) is also the best way to avoid an STD. However, most women find that their partners do not prefer to wear condoms during intercourse, blaming a lack of sensation and leading to uncomfortable situations for both parties. Dr. Nilani says that this lack of enthusiasm for using a condom may be psychological. However, she assures us that new products are constantly coming into the market that are geared towards heightening pleasure.

COMBINED ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE PILL

Commonly known as the Pill, this form of birth control contains derivatives of oestrogen and progestogen that ensure no eggs are released from your ovaries. There are different brands of the



Pill available, but how you use each of them remains the same—basically, you take a tablet every day to avoid pregnancy. Some Pill packs contain 21 hormone pills and 7 inactive non-hormone pills, also called placebo pills. Look at non-active pills as dummy tablets: they don't do anything, but you don't have to break your habit of taking a pill a day. You get your period during your week of placebo pills. Other packs just have 21 tablets, and you begin a new pack after 7 days with no pills. In terms of effectiveness, there's really no difference between packs with or without placebo pills. It just depends on whether you can be responsible enough to take a break from

pill-popping for a week and start where you left off. It's recommended that you take the pill at the same time every day for highest efficiency, and if you're just getting started, use alternate forms of protection (such as condoms) for at least a month to give your body time to adjust and to ensure you don't conceive.

DEPO-PROVERA INJECTIONS

This is essentially a contraceptive injection that contains progestin, and is injected once every three months. It works by suppressing ovulation, thereby stopping your ovaries from releasing eggs. (Released eggs increase your chances of pregnancy). It also works to keep sperm from reaching the egg by thickening the cervical mucus.

IMPLANTS

A tiny rod is inserted underneath the skin of your upper arm by a medical professional. It leaves a scar so small that you can't even tell it's there unless you point it out. Implants work much like the Pill and Depo-Provera injections, where the ovaries are deterred from releasing eggs and your cervical mucus is thickened. It prevents pregnancy for up to five years (if you want to conceive before then, you can simply take out the implant). On the plus side, once the implant is in, you don't have to think about it for the entire duration and it doesn't interfere with sex. Your period will initially change until your body gets used to the implant, but things should settle down a few weeks in. If it doesn't, see your doctor.

INTRA-UTERINE CONTRACEPTIVE DEVICE (IUCD)

Essentially, a small, hormone-free, plastic-and-copper device is inserted into your uterus. It comprises of one or two thin threads at the end that hang through the opening of your cervix into the top of your vagina. This sounds scary, but it will be fitted by a trained professional (so don't worry!) and blocks sperm from entering your bod for up to 10 years. After you complete every period, it's recommended that you double check if the threads are in place. The best part? Sex should feel exactly the same, even for him.

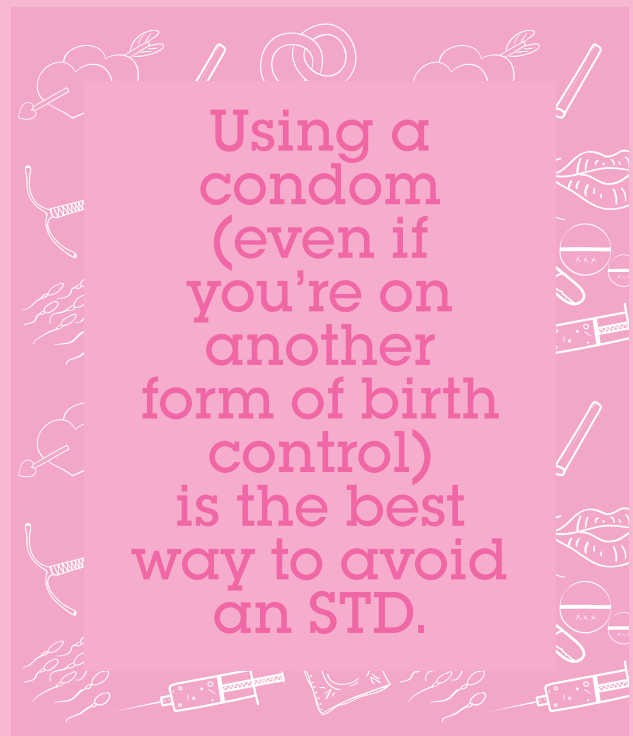
INTRA-UTERINE SYSTEM (IUS)

Similar to the IUCD, a small T-shaped plastic device is implanted into your uterus and releases progestogen, which stops pregnancy. Depending on the brand, it can last between 3-5 years, and sex feels as good as ever.

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

Commonly known as the 'morning-after pill', emergency contraception should be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex, but the sooner the better! "Unlike the Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill, the morning-after pill is a high dose of only progestogen, which works primarily to delay ovulation," explains Dr. Nilani. You take it once, and it's done.

If it sounds too good to be true, that's because it is. Many women are unaware that taking the emergency pill on the regular can do their bodies a lot of harm. Dr. Nilani says, "It interferes with your regular cycle, thereby making future unwanted pregnancies more likely, and is certainly not as effective as the regular OCP." So, girlfriend, don't take this pill often. Actually, avoid taking it at all, if possible.



“You can skip your period with the OCP by taking two pill packs back-to-back (without the placebo pills), and it’s acceptable to do this for about 3-4 cycles,” reveals Dr. Nilani.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

You’ll gain weight if you start taking the Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill

“I’ve been on the pill for about 6 years now, and I’ve noticed a fair amount of weight gain over the years,” says Shalini, 28. “I was initially uncertain if this was due to the pill or my body just adapting to a sedentary lifestyle. My doctor said it was probably my eating habits! Oops!”

While women may put on a little weight upon starting this method of contraception, how much she puts on really depends on her diet and lifestyle choices. “Women tend to complain about weight gain while on the Oral Contraceptive Pill,” says Dr. Nilani. There are two primary causes for this: “It can increase your appetite,

which leads to weight gain. Or, women may experience a certain amount of water retention. However, if you watch your diet, resist the urge to overindulge, eat healthy with a low salt intake (this includes processed food) and exercise regularly, you should not put on any extra weight.”

You shouldn’t use the Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill to skip your period

“I am going on holiday and really don’t want my period getting in the way of some beach time, and I read online that it was okay to use the OCP to skip it. But, I’ve not worked up the courage to try!” shares Malsha, 30.

“You can skip your period with the OCP by taking two pill packs back-to-back (without the placebo pills), and it’s acceptable to do this for

about 3-4 cycles,” reveals Dr. Nilani. “The more accepted method of delaying, but not skipping your period entirely, is to use a hormone called norethisterone.”

Pulling out before ejaculation always works

Um, no, not really. “I went on a date with this guy who bragged that he never used condoms with his previous conquests,” shared Natasha, 25. “He just pulled out. I looked at him shocked and said, ‘This isn’t something to boast about. You could’ve gotten someone pregnant.’ In any case, I faked an emergency at work and left, pronto!”

The guy pulling out before ejaculation is no guarantee that you won’t wind up pregnant. This is not a fool-proof birth control method, and accidents can always happen. If your partner suggests it or refuses to wear a condom, don’t go through with it.

If you’re not sexually active all the time, you don’t have to take the pill

“My fiancé and I were doing long-distance, and I kept taking the pill even though I knew we’d only see each other every couple of months,” says Thanuri, 32. Ultimately, this your personal choice. Dr. Nilani suggests generally steering clear of any sort of medication unless absolutely necessary. “Every drug has potential side effects, however small,” she said. “But, if you are in a long-term relationship or highly likely to have unprotected sex, then you might as well be on it.” Dr. Nilani cautions all women that the pill and emergency contraception will protect you against pregnancy but not STDs. So, remember to use an

alternate barrier method, like condoms, if your sex mate is not a guy you know and trust!

Aside from the Pill, no other birth control measure will make you gain weight

Not true. Whether or not you pack on the kilos will largely depend on your lifestyle, and how often you commit to a nutritious diet and regular exercise. However, it doesn’t hurt to check if the form of birth control is likely to make the numbers rise on the scale. “You won’t gain weight from both IUCD and IUS,” clarifies Dr. Nilani. “However, you have a higher chance of gaining weight with the Depo-Provera injection, compared to the Implant.”

The OCP will clear up my acne!

Actually, chances are, it might not. “One of the potential ‘minor’ side effects of the OCP is acne. However, there are pills such as Dianette that are used as both a contraception as well as for acne, especially in the case of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS).” The takeaway: Not all Pill brands cure acne, so if you’re looking to target the latter specifically, while ensuring babies are out of the picture, make sure to tell your doctor.

Navigating birth control is like treading on broken glass—one misstep can send you catapulting down the wrong rabbit hole. Always talk to your doctor and heed her (or his!) advice. The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka also has a ton of information, plus a line of various birth control options available. Their Centre for Family Health (CFH) is on 37/27, Bullers Lane, Colombo 7 if you would like to visit for more material. ■