

Sources:

Sahih Muslim

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Qaradawi, Lawful and Prohibited in Islam. Kuwait: Al Faisal Press, 1989, p. 201-202.

The Muslim Women's League has provided this and other brochures for your convenience to assist you in making decisions about your health while keeping in mind the guidelines found in Islam. In no way is the information found in these brochures intended to take the form of a fatwa or an absolute Islamic law. Our intention is to better inform Muslim women and their families about their health, and we pray that Allah may accept our efforts.



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Muslim Women's League

Birth Control and Islam



What is Contraception?

Contraception, or birth control, is the process or means used to prevent pregnancy. A variety of options are available including the use of hormone medications, contraceptive devices (barriers), periods of avoiding sexual intercourse, and surgery. In this brochure you will read about the guidelines found in Islam to help you decide on the method of contraception that is right for you and your spouse.

A Word About Unwanted Pregnancy

As difficult as this is, we Muslims must acknowledge that unwanted pregnancies do occur in our community, often under very unfortunate circumstances. The best way to deal with this problem is by prevention. For unmarried women, this means abstaining from sexual relations until marriage. For married women, using an effective method of birth control consistently offers the best chance at preventing pregnancy. However, people are not perfect, mistakes occur and all birth control methods have a failure rate. In the US, many women who are faced with an unwanted pregnancy opt for pregnancy termination (abortion) which is legal until the 24th week (sixth month) of gestation. For most women, making the decision to get an abortion is often a difficult and highly emotional process that can have lasting effects. Other women choose to carry the pregnancy to term and give the infant up for adoption at the time of birth. Of course, many, (and perhaps most) women (and couples) who are faced with an unwanted pregnancy simply accept the situation and keep and raise the child.

Early scholars of Islam considered abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy (up to 3 months) to be a form of birth control practiced by women and therefore not prohibited. Their rationale was based on the hadith that says that ensoulment of the fetus does not take place until a certain number of days has passed after conception. Among the schools of thought the range was somewhere between 40 and 80 days (and up to 120 in one *madhab*). After that, abortion was considered *haram* as the unborn child was believed to be a person at that point, with all of the rights normally afforded to living children. Exceptions to this rule were made when the mother's life was in danger from the pregnancy, when continuation of the pregnancy would compromise the life of a child already living (e.g., by depleting the supply of

breast milk on which the child depended), or when the fetus suffered from a lethal anomaly (which means death was certain at the time of birth.)

Today, the vast majority of Muslim scholars have ruled that life begins at conception and therefore to take that life at any time thereafter would be prohibited. Their conclusion is based on medical evidence that indicates the presence of a nervous system and functioning heart very early in pregnancy (within the first 3 weeks), which is a sign of human viability. Therefore, most Muslims believe that abortion at any time in the pregnancy is *haram (prohibited)*, except under the conditions mentioned above.

According to some scholars, abortion is also lawful when the pregnancy occurs as a result of rape or incest. To others, however, the child is considered to be free of guilt from the sins of the parents and therefore should not be punished by being aborted. This continues to be an area of debate.

Women who are faced with an unwanted pregnancy need support and encouragement from their loved ones. This applies to the young unmarried woman who made an error in judgment as well as to a married woman who may be in the process of separating and divorcing from an abusive husband. While it is easy to condemn and ostracize women in such circumstances, especially in the first case, ultimate judgment rests with Allah (swt) alone. Therefore, if the woman is able to carry the pregnancy to term, perhaps under considerable hardship, she deserves the support of the community. These are difficult situations that require thoughtful attention and ongoing discussion.

Islamic Perspective

In Islam, the purpose of sexual behavior between husband and wife is not limited to procreation. Since often times the couple is not prepared to have children, Allah has made contraception permissible under certain guidelines.

The Prophet (PBUH) did not prohibit contraception (the withdrawal method or coitus interruptus, which was practiced at the time). In almost every hadith that discusses withdrawal ('azl) the Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said that even if it is practiced, if God intends a child to be born she/he will be born. Although the methods used today for contraception are very effective, not a single one provides 100% assurance that pregnancy will not occur. Thus, as always, Allah's will prevails when He so ordains a matter such as conception.

By analogy, the methods that exist today as contraceptives are lawful for Muslims to use at their discretion. Contraception can be practiced for several reasons such as preservation of beauty, spacing the time between children, and emotional and psychological reasons, among others. A husband and wife are urged to discuss the issue of contraception in order to choose the method that is most comfortable for both of them.



Raising Muslim children is a tremendous responsibility that both the husband and wife must be prepared for.

Contraception Options

Since there are numerous means of contraception, it is highly recommended that couples discuss their options with a doctor before choosing a form of birth control.

Barrier Methods:

Barrier methods can be purchased over-the-counter or with a prescription. They are placed in the woman's vagina or over a man's erect penis in order to prevent pregnancy by stopping sperm from reaching the womb.

Spermicides

Contraceptive foams, jellies, creams, and suppositories contain chemical spermicides which, when inserted into the vagina, prevent pregnancy by killing sperm before they enter the uterus.

Condom

A condom is placed over the man's erect penis. It can also prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Diaphragm

A diaphragm is inserted into the woman's vagina before intercourse. Diaphragms should be used along with spermicidal jellies or creams for maximum effectiveness.

Cervical Cap

Like diaphragms, cervical caps are inserted into the woman's vagina to cover the cervix and prevent sperm from gaining access to the uterus. Cervical caps should also be used with spermicidal jellies or creams.

Hormonal Methods:

Hormonal methods contain a hormone that prevents pregnancy through prevention of ovulation. These methods can be injected, implanted, or taken orally (pill).

Injection

The birth control shot, administered every 3 months, contains a hormone that prevents pregnancy. Women receive the injection in the buttocks or arm every 3 months.

Implant

Implants are small, flexible sticks containing hormones and are placed in the woman's upper arm. They can prevent pregnancy for five years, and once removed, the woman is again able to conceive.

Birth Control Pill

Birth control pills contain hormones that prevent pregnancy when taken daily. Today's pills are safe and effective for most women, if taken as prescribed.

Periodic Abstinence (Rhythm Method)

Periodic abstinence methods consist of avoiding intercourse during the woman's fertile period. A calendar, basal body temperature, or cervical mucus are used to indicate the period in which the woman's egg can become fertilized. Consult with your doctor on determining your fertile period.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding, like the rhythm method, is often considered a form of "natural family planning." When a woman is nursing an infant, hormones are produced that inhibit ovulation and decrease the chance that she will get pregnant.

This is most likely during the first six months when the infant relies solely on breast milk and is nursing at least six times a day. After that, as the frequency of nursing decreases, the chance of conceiving increases and so this is not a consistently reliable method. However, it can certainly be a method of choice for many couples.

Surgery

Sterilization is the most common form of birth control used worldwide and is extremely effective.

For a woman, sterilization involves the sealing off of her fallopian tubes (tubal ligation). In male sterilization, or vasectomy, the tubes that carry sperm are sealed, tied, or cut. In both cases, the effects of sterilization are permanent.

Muslim scholars are not unanimous in their position regarding sterilization. To some, sterilization is prohibited since it alters God's creation; they draw an analogy between sterilization and cosmetic surgery (electively altering part of the human body for no medical benefit) which is clearly prohibited in various hadith. Others consider sterilization to be as lawful as any of the other methods of birth control which they accept since the Prophet (pbuh) did not prohibit the type of birth control which was practiced at that time (coitus interruptus). In Iran, for example, Muslim clerics have ruled that sterilization is lawful.

For those interested in this method, we suggest consulting with Muslim scholars who have expertise in this area and with appropriately trained physicians who can explain the risks and benefits in detail.