

Before Condoms

Birth control has a history of cramping your style



BY BRAD DUNN

COLORADO STATE U.
ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRAD NORMAN,
WESTERN MICHIGAN U.



1996:

*"Don't worry, baby.
I have a condom."*

A.D. 85:

*"No sweat, honey. I just drank a
potion of bawthorn bark, ivy,
willow and poplar."*

2696 B.C.:

*"It's all right, darling. I've
applied crocodile dung and
honey to my vulva."*

enough about human physiology to be able to safely control fertility. Although scientists continue to experiment with new methods, there are plenty of proven ones on the market. The male birth control pill and the female condom, the two most recent brainchildren of humanity's contraceptive legacy, continue the effort to make sex more enjoyable by making it less productive.

Modern society often complains that its birth control practices diminish the sexual experience. Fortunately, the life history of contraception shows us that its methods will continue to evolve. Remember: It could be worse — you could be using a tortoise-shell condom.

Brad Dunn, who just graduated from Colorado State U., declines to make any comments about birth control.

By the 18th century, scientists had come up with more birth control solutions than you could shake a condom at.

THE NEXT TIME YOU CATCH yourself whining about the dulling effect of a condom or the fact that the Pill makes you moody, just consider the potions of yesteryear — yuck.

Birth control has had a long and storied life. Soon after humans answered, "Where do babies come from?" they asked, "How can we stop them?" The understanding of procreation itself was the progenitor of contraception. And although it wasn't until the last century that science produced any valid solutions, birth control appears to have had an odd infancy in ancient cultures.

In the beginning, when all the begetting was going on, Onan fathered birth control in the Old Testament. The book of Genesis recounts how the Hebrew "spilled his seed on the ground" during sex with his brother's widow to avoid getting her pregnant. This begat not only the "withdrawal" method but also the recognition of birth control in the West.

Ancient Chinese men made an art of the withdrawal method. They believed that if they had sex with a woman without reaching climax, their "seed" would grow stronger. Men with enormous discipline, then, had as much nonorgasmic sex as possible so that when they finally decided to get a woman pregnant, she would receive the highest-quality sperm.

While abstinence and withdrawal may have been the earliest methods for couples to avoid pregnancy, abortion was equally present in antiquity. Aristotle, when he wasn't waxing about *Poetics*, wrote, "The proper thing to do... if children are then conceived in excess to the [family] limit so fixed, is to have miscarriage induced before sense and life have begun in the embryo" (Aristotle, *Politics*).

The earliest formulas for abortion, however,

come from Chinese Emperor Shen Nung. By his death in 2696 B.C., Nung had written various medical essays, including one in which the internal applications of certain plants and leeches assured miscarriage. Early Egyptians also had formulas for abortion, like a concoction of dates, onions and the fruit of the acanthus crushed in honey, sprinkled on cloth and applied to the vulva.

Anti-climactic

By the 18th century, scientists had come up with more birth control solutions than you could shake a condom at. Recipes for pre- and post-sex vaginal mixtures were popping up everywhere. The 18th century writer Musitanus figured that if either crocus or mint were applied to the vagina immediately after sex, there would be no conception.

The condom made its debut in England in 1709, although the idea actually dates back to ancient Egypt. By the end of the century, the best condoms were made from animal membrane and tied around the base of the penis with a pink silk ribbon. Before the membrane condoms made it to the East, the Japanese had already been using hard sheaths made from tortoise shells. Ouch!

Early forms of the diaphragm were also widespread at this time. Women inserted silver or gold balls to block off the womb. Sometimes these balls had bells inside them to make love-making more musical. Sponges soaked in water and brandy were placed in the vagina as a spermicide, but the results were unreliable. The search for contraceptive potions continues beyond the 1937 advent of the Pill.

Fortunately, in the late 20th century, we know

That was then...

- "A spider's egg containing two worms, if attached to the body with deer skin before sunrise, will prevent conception for a year." (Pliny)
- "Immediately after ejaculation let the two come apart and let the woman rise roughly, sneeze and blow her nose several times, and call out in a loud voice. She should jump violently backwards seven to nine times." (Islamic physician Rhazes, A.D. 900)
- "Jusquiamum [an herb] mixed with the milk of a Mare, and laid upon a piece of Hart's skin, and hung about the woman's neck keeps her from conceiving. If a woman takes a frog and opens his mouth and spit in it thrice, she shall not conceive that year." (William Williams' *Occult Physique*, 1660)

This is now...

- The Pill. Birth control pills ingested daily by women prevent the ovaries from releasing eggs. (97-99.9 percent effective)
- Intrauterine device (IUD). A small plastic device inserted into a woman's womb. (97-99.2 percent effective)
- Condom. A thin latex or animal tissue sheath covers the penis and prevents

sperm from entering the vagina. (88-92 percent effective)

- Female condom. A loose-fitting plastic pouch lines the vagina and prevents sperm from reaching the egg. (72-97 percent effective)
- Diaphragm. A soft, rubber device used with sperm-killing cream or jelly fits over the cervix and prevents sperm from joining the egg. (82-94 percent effective)
- Cervical cap. A smaller version of the diaphragm that must be used with spermicide, but can be left in longer than a diaphragm. (82-94 percent effective)
- The rhythm method. The woman's menstrual cycle is charted to predict fertile times. Abstinence from intercourse or barrier contraceptives should be used during the nine or more "unsafe" days. (80-99 percent effective)
- Tubal sterilization: surgery that permanently blocks the woman's tubes where sperm join the egg or permanently blocks the man's tubes that carry the sperm. (98.6-99.8 percent effective)
- Hormone injections. Injections can either last 12 weeks or five years. (99.7-99.96 percent effective)
- Morning after pill. This is a hormone treatment that prevents the egg from either being fertilized or attaching to the wall of the uterus. Despite its name, it can be taken anytime within 72 hours after intercourse. (82-100 percent effective) — BD

(All percentages are from Planned Parenthood.)