

## **Not Your Mother's IUD**

Long considered unsafe after the Dalkon Shield created serious health problems for women in the 1970s, the intrauterine device (IUD) is making a strong comeback. With current data indicating its safety, a failure rate of only 1%, and hormonal and nonhormonal options with effectiveness periods of five and ten years, respectively, an IUD has become the type of long acting reversible contraception (LARC) most recommended by Health Quarters and other reproductive health care providers. LARCs, which also include the Depo shot, the NuvaRing, the Patch, and the Implanon implant, are considered “forgettable” birth control because, unlike remembering to take the Pill every day, the user doesn't have to pay attention to her method for a month – or even years. These relatively new methods are ideal for the high number of HQ clients taking the Pill, who can often undermine its effectiveness by not taking it faithfully. In FY11, HQ saw an 11% increase in IUD insertions over the previous year.

While the stated effectiveness of the Pill is 96-99%, in practice this rate can be much lower – around 92%. Poor user habits are the reason for the discrepancy: taking the Pill at different times of day, missing days, or skipping pills all decrease its effectiveness. It appears that its popularity is based on its low cost, as many Health Quarters clients buy one month at a time for as little as \$15, depending on insurance and income.

“Forgettable” contraception offers a range of other options. Many women are trying a relatively new product, Implanon, which is inserted under the skin. Implanon is a match stick-size capsule or implant; it works by slowly releasing etonogestrel, a hormone that prevents pregnancy over the course of three years. Because Implanon does not contain estrogen, this may be the right option for women who cannot use estrogen. At HQ, 57% more implants were inserted from FY10 to FY11.

For even longer protection against pregnancy, an IUD is the ultimate LARC. It is a very small, T-shaped device – about one inch in size – that is inserted into the uterus by a health care professional, such as the clinician at Health Quarters.

There are two types of IUD available in the U.S.: the ParaGard, which contains copper but no hormones and is effective for at least 10 years; and the Mirena, which releases a small amount of the hormone progestin, and is effective for at least five years. Both prevent sperm from joining with an egg, thereby preventing fertilization/pregnancy. The Mirena can also prevent ovulation. The IUD is a good choice for those who are not at high risk for sexually transmitted diseases or infections, and is one of the least expensive forms of birth control available today. (At Health Quarters, there is no cost for the device with most insurances, although there is a fee for the office visit. Women who do not have or are not using insurance will likely pay anywhere from nothing to \$200, based on a sliding fee scale.) Over the life of the IUD, this one-time cost certainly compares favorably with monthly charges for the Pill.

And there are many other benefits: There's nothing to remember to take (unlike the Pill), put in (unlike the NuvaRing) or take off (unlike the Patch); the ParaGard IUD does not change a woman's hormone levels; and the Mirena IUD may reduce period cramps and reduce menstrual flow by as much as 90 %. For some women, periods stop altogether, yet the ability to become

pregnant returns quickly once the IUD is removed. And a recent study published in the medical journal *Lancet* reports that women who use IUD halved the risk of developing cervical cancer compared to those that had not ever used the device. These results are contrary to popular belief that IUD could be a risk factor for cervical cancer. Overall, the IUD is simple to use, long-lasting, reversible, can be hormone-free, and economical. Ninety-nine percent of IUD users are pleased with them.

LARCs, like other birth control methods, do not protect against STDs. HQ advises all clients to use a condom during sex as well unless you and your partner have tested negative for HIV and other STDs.