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Don't expect any radical changes in birth control methods, experts say.

Birth control methods are likely to improve

By Shari Rudavsky
The Indianapolis Star

The past half-century has seen an explosion of birth control options, starting with the introduction of The Pill in 1960.

So what will the next half-century bring in the way of new contraceptive methods?

Don't expect any radical departures from what's already out there, experts say.

"I think one thing we will see soon are some variations on methods that we've already seen, other forms of hormonal delivery," said Lawrence Finer, director of domestic research for the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit organization based in New York that does reproductive health research.

A new frameless intrauterine device, or IUD, called the Gynefix might be coming to the United States soon, Finer said. The device works similarly to a traditional IUD, interfering with fertilization, but it is smaller so it has lower risk of complications.

Norplant, taken off the market more than three years ago, has spawned a sibling contraceptive method — Implanon.

Unlike Norplant, which involved inserting six rods under the skin, Implanon consists of a single rod implant. Women who used Norplant often complained about the insertion and removal, so this new method attempts to address that, Finer said.

Much research concentrates on discovering methods that protect women against HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, said Dr. David F. Archer, director of the CONRAD clinical research center at Eastern Virginia Medical School, a program devoted to researching new contraceptive methods.

Archer and his collaborators are investigating spermicidal gels or suppositories that also have microbiocidal and virocidal properties to prevent the spread of disease.

"The new methods that are being evaluated are methods that are female-controlled and can be used at the time of intercourse," Archer said. "The idea is to develop a protective device for women."

For women who prefer natural family planning, Georgetown University's Institute for Reproductive Health is working on a method that teaches a woman how to as-

sess her cervical secretions to determine whether she's fertile.

"There's not a little tool. It's simply knowing what to look for and looking for it," said Victoria Jennings, director of the institute.

Not just for women

Then there are methods for males.

Said Dr. John Stutsman, medical director of ob-gyn services at the Wishard Primary Care Center in Indianapolis: "It would certainly be good if there were something more on the market for the male."

CONRAD is funding a study that is looking at whether male fertility can be governed by implanted rods, similar to Norplant or Implanon. The rods would release hormones that could inhibit the production of sperm, Archer said.

Preliminary studies have shown that 60 percent of men who use this technique have no sperm; the problem is that the other 40 percent do continue to produce sperm, albeit at lower numbers, he said, making this method less reliable than other forms of birth control.