



New from

Use of Contraception and Family Planning Services in the United States, 1988

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Use of Contraception

The leading contraceptive method overall in both 1982 and 1988 was the pill, but female sterilization was approaching the pill in popularity by 1988: 31 percent of contracepting women were using the pill and 28 percent were using sterilization in 1988.¹ If male and female sterilization are considered together as one method, however, then sterilization was the leading method, used by 39 percent of contracepting couples. Among currently married and formerly married women, female sterilization alone was the leading method. Among never married women, the pill was the leading method by far (Table 1). These findings are based on the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a national sample of women in the United States 15–44 years of age. Personal interviews were conducted in the homes of 8,450 women in 1988, 7,969 women in 1982, and 9,797 women in 1973.

The oral contraceptive pill is the leading nonsurgical method of contraception, and the most effective (except for sterilization) in preventing pregnancy.² But it does not prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The condom is less effective at preventing pregnancy than the pill because it is often not used correctly or consistently,² but it is useful for preventing the spread of sexually transmitted

diseases. Complete estimates of condom use should therefore include women who rely on their partners to use condoms to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, even if they do not use them to prevent pregnancy. This is a more complex methodological problem which is under study, but not covered in the new reports.

Condom Use

Among never married women using contraception, the proportion who relied on their partner's use of a condom increased from 12 to 20 percent between 1982 and 1988 (Table 1). The condom, however, is sometimes used in combination with other methods—often, the pill. Women who use the pill, sterilization, or the IUD (intrauterine device) along with the condom are not classified in the statistics cited above, and in Table 1, as using the condom, but as using the other method, because the other is more effective in *preventing pregnancy*.² If we count all women who reported that their partners use condoms for birth control in 1988, even if they are using some other birth control method (such as the pill), we get an estimate of about 5.8 million women ages 15–44 whose partners were currently using the condom¹—about 10 percent of the 58 million women of reproductive age.

The IUD and Female Sterilization

In 1985 and 1986, the IUD was withdrawn from the US market by two of its major manufacturers.³ As a result, use of the IUD dropped by two-thirds between 1982 and 1988, from 2.2 million women in 1982 to 0.7 million in 1988.

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TABLE 1—Number of Women 15–44 Years of Age, Percent and Number Using Contraception, and Percent Distribution by Method Used, According to Marital Status: US, 1982 and 1988

	Total		Never married		Currently married		Formerly married	
	1982	1988	1982	1988	1982	1988	1982	1988
Number of women (thousands)	54,099	57,900	19,164	21,058	28,231	29,147	6,704	7,695
Percent using contraception	55.7	60.3	35.3	41.9	69.7	74.3	55.5	57.6
Number using contraception (thousands)	30,133	34,914	6,765	8,823	19,677	21,656	3,721	4,432
All contraceptors	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Female sterilization	23.2	27.5	3.7	6.4	26.9	31.4	39.2	50.7
Male sterilization	10.9	11.7	1.8	1.8	15.5	17.3	3.4	3.6
Pill	28.0	30.7	53.0	59.0	19.3	20.4	28.4	25.3
IUD	7.1	2.0	5.4	1.3	6.9	2.0	11.5	3.6
Diaphragm	8.1	5.7	13.4	4.9	6.5	6.2	6.7	5.3
Condom	12.0	14.6	11.6	19.6	14.1	14.3	1.5	5.9
Other	10.7	7.7	11.1	7.0	10.8	8.4	9.2	5.7

SOURCE: Reference 1.

Groups that had relatively high proportions using the IUD in 1982 tended to increase their use of female sterilization by 1988. For example, the percent of formerly married contraceptive users who were using the IUD fell from 12 percent in 1982 to 4 percent in 1988, and the percent using female sterilization rose from 39 percent to 51 percent. The new report and a forthcoming analysis show a sharp increase in the percent of contraceptive users who chose female sterilization among several groups that had higher than average proportions using the IUD in 1982: Black, formerly married, less educated, low income, and Hispanic women.^{1,4}

Why has female sterilization become the leading method among married and formerly married women? Previous studies of NSFG data have shown that by age 30, three-fourths of ever married women have had all the births they want; a typical woman getting a tubal operation was about age 30 and had two or three births. This means that she had 10 or 15 years remaining when she might be able, but did not want, to conceive. About five out of six women in their late 20s have used the pill, which probably means that they want contraception that is as effective and as unobtrusive as the pill. Now that the IUD is no longer widely available, there are only two methods as effective as the pill: female sterilization and male sterilization. The medical techniques of female sterilization have become markedly easier and safer in the past 20 years, so that sterilization often does not require an overnight hospital stay. Also, insurance coverage of sterilization may have become more common in recent years.^{4,5}

The Pill

The pill was introduced in the United States 30 years ago, in 1960. Since then, it has been used by the vast majority of women of reproductive age—40.3 million women ages 15–44 in 1988 have used the pill at some time in their lives; 10.7 million of them were using it in 1988. Among women under age 25, the pill was by far the leading method in both 1982 and 1988. The sharp decline in pill use that occurred among married women between 1973 and 1982 did not continue between 1982 and 1988.¹

Use of Family Planning Services

Sterilization, the pill, and the diaphragm account for 76 percent of current contraceptive use. All of these methods require medical visits to obtain them initially; use of the pill requires regular visits to renew the prescription and check for side effects. Previous research has shown that pill users have a particularly high rate of use of family planning services, even after their other characterizations are taken into account.⁶ In addition, young women often make family planning visits to obtain pregnancy tests or to learn about birth control methods.⁷ For these reasons and others, it is important to determine how many women use family planning services, and where they obtain those services.

About 20 million women (35 percent of the 57.9 million women ages 15–44) made one or more visits for family planning services in the 12 months before the survey.⁸ This

was about the same number as in the 12 months before the 1982 survey. Of the 20 million women, about 13 million obtained these services from a private physician, private group practice, or health maintenance organization (HMO); about 7 million used a clinic. Of the 7 million clinic users, about half, or 3.74 million, used a Title X clinic. Black women, teenagers, and low-income were much more likely to use clinics than other women. Women were also more likely to use clinics for their first visit than for their most recent visit: 58 percent used a clinic at their first visit, while only 36 percent used a clinic at their most recent visit. The age group most likely to have had a family planning visit in the last year was women 20–24 years of age—the age group in which use of the oral contraceptive pill is most common.^{4,8}

These are only some of the first findings from the 1988 National Survey of Family Growth. Other reports are planned on such topics as contraception, infertility, marriage and cohabitation, and wanted and unwanted births. In addition, a public use computer tape of the 1988 data has been released, so that interested researchers can explore these and other topics further.

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Copies of *Contraceptive Use in the United States, 1973–88*, Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics No. 182, and *Use of Family Planning Services in the United States: 1982 and 1988*, Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics No. 184 can be obtained free of charge from the Scientific and Technical Information Branch, Room 1064, NCHS, 6525 Belcrest Road, Hyattsville, MD 20782.

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