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What lies behind the rise of the contraception app?

🕒 8 April 2023



GETTY IMAGES

| The NHS said the natural fertility awareness method, if followed consistently and correctly, could be up to 99% effective

Amy Philpps

BBC News

The contraceptive pill was celebrated for the control and freedom it gave women when it first became available in the 1960s. Since then, most women in the UK have used hormone contraception at some stage of their lives. So why are some now turning to technology instead?

Montana Brown - known for her appearance on the ITV show Love Island - recently announced she was pregnant, two years after coming off hormone contraception.

In a post on her Instagram page, the influencer said she had been tracking her cycle naturally, a form of contraception **called the natural fertility awareness method.**

"It's taught me so much about my cycle that when the time came to make the switch and plan for a baby, I felt so in tune with my body," she wrote.

The post was part of a paid advert with Natural Cycles - an app established in 2013 that now has 2.5 million registered users.

In 2018 Natural Cycles became the first birth control app to be cleared by the **US Food and Drug Administration.**

Its makers said it used an algorithm to determine a woman's fertility status based on body temperature and has claimed a 93% success rate - **the same as the contraceptive pill in normal use.**

The **idea behind fertility apps is that they offer an alternative to traditional forms of contraception**, and they work by highlighting the days when they calculate that pregnancy is most likely to occur. These depend on an individual's menstrual cycle.

However, there have been complaints about Natural Cycles **from women who say they became pregnant while using it**.

A Natural Cycles spokesperson said: "As with any contraceptive, it's important the product is used correctly to maximise effectiveness - as no method is 100% effective in preventing pregnancy, even when used perfectly."

She added the app's effectiveness was "higher than most fertility awareness methods".

- **Are women turning their back on the pill?**
- **Do pregnancy prevention apps work?**
- **Can I trust fertility apps?**

The NHS stresses that condoms are the only type of contraception that can both prevent pregnancy and protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

In 2018, a **Facebook advert for the app was banned by the UK's Advertising Standards Authority**, with claims that it was "highly accurate" and "provided a clinically tested alternative to other birth control methods" found to be misleading.

Despite this, the app claims to have hundreds of thousands of users in the UK, while other fertility tracking apps - like Flo and Clue - also claim to have millions of users worldwide.

So what is behind the rise of technology contraception?

'There's a risk in everything'



| April has spent the last 10 years tracking her body temperature for contraception

April Inskip, from Leicestershire, has been using the natural fertility awareness method for almost a decade.

Over the course of eight years she tried different hormonal contraceptives before deciding they were not right for her.

"As I got older I realised it simply wasn't worth the toll [the pill] took on my body.

"I felt lethargic, moody, my skin frequently broke out randomly and I didn't want to mess any further with my hormones," she said.

April takes her basal body temperature first thing in the morning and records her reading in an app on her phone.

Her daily readings are plotted on to a virtual chart that allows her to see the relevant peaks or dips throughout her cycle.

"I prefer to see the whole chart rather than have an app take the information and interpret it for you," she said.

"I am very confident in reading my body and comfortable with this method."

April said that if she did fall pregnant she would not feel any different to how she would feel if she was on another form of contraception and it failed.

"I wouldn't blame the method, as there is a risk in everything," she said.

"If you have any doubts and are charting to avoid pregnancy then you just use a barrier method as back-up. That being said, even condoms aren't 100% effective."

According to the NHS, minor side effects of the pill can include mood swings, nausea, breast tenderness and headaches.

It said there was a very low risk of serious side effects, such as blood clots and cervical cancer.

'It has helped me understand my body'



Helen said it took two years for her periods to return after coming off the mini pill

Helen, from Nottinghamshire, has been following the natural fertility awareness method since stopping hormone contraception three years ago at the age of 30.

She said she had taken the mini pill for several years but felt it was affecting her mood.

"It gave me the idea to try coming off hormonal contraceptives altogether to see if there was any change," she said.

"I felt so much better in myself; however it did take two years for my periods to return."

Helen, now 33, said she does not plan to have children in the near future but believed she was "mature enough and financially stable enough" to cope if she did become pregnant.

She said: "I am so glad that I stopped taking hormonal contraception before I actively wanted children, as I was not equipped with the knowledge that it might take so long for my body to return to normal."

She tracks her cycle with the help of an app on her phone.

"I've learned more about my cycle and my body from this app," she said.

"It has helped me understand the changes to expect in my body over the month: what is normal, what is potentially abnormal."

'I listen to my body'



| Laura said she felt a lot more comfortable using the natural fertility awareness method

Laura, from Derbyshire, said she was avoiding returning to hormone contraception until she had finished growing her family.

She gave birth to her first child in 2021 - later than she had been planning.

"It took us nearly a year and a half to actually conceive, which I do believe is partially due to the amount of time I was on the pill for," she said.

Laura, 33, had been on the combined pill from the age of 17 to 29.

She had a six-month break when she was 21 and during that time her period did not return.

"At the time I was so young, I wasn't really thinking about children so I really didn't think about the impact the pill was having on my body," she said.

Laura said she was not planning to get pregnant again for a while and was following the natural fertility awareness method to control this.

She also used an app on her phone to help but did not depend entirely on technology.

"I listen to my body a lot more and, as long as you're tracking where you are in your cycle, you should be able to figure out what stage you're at," she said.

"I'm a lot more comfortable than I ever have been on any medication.

"I do feel a lot more in tune with my body now than I ever have been."

Laura said if this method failed and she did get pregnant sooner than she wanted to, it would not be an unwanted pregnancy.

"Whilst we're not quite ready for baby number two, children are a blessing so we would be happy that we've been able to conceive again," she said.

The NHS said it could take a while for women's periods to come back after they stopped taking the pill and, when they did return, they could be irregular.

This was because the pill contains hormones that stop ovulation each month.

It said women should allow up to three months for their natural menstrual cycle to fully re-establish itself.

"It's unlikely the time you've been on the pill will cause infertility," **NHS advice says.**

"You might be able to conceive immediately after you stop taking it.

"However, while the pill does not cause fertility problems, it can mask underlying problems you may already have, such as irregular periods."

'Not suitable for everyone'



| Annabel Sowemimo said the natural fertility awareness method was not suitable for everyone

According to the NHS, the natural fertility awareness method involves identifying the signs and symptoms of fertility during the menstrual cycle.

These include the length of the cycle, daily body temperature readings and changes to cervical secretions.

It said if followed consistently and correctly, it could be up to 99% effective.

However, Annabel Sowemimo, a doctor from the Leicester Sexual Health NHS service, said it was not suitable for everyone.

"If your lifestyle isn't stable, if you're not in the same place and you're not going to have access to your calendar, your thermometer, if your sleep pattern is irregular, all of these things can make it difficult and reduce the reliability of the method," she said.

Dr Sowemimo said it would also not be recommended to women with irregular cycles, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), or women that were postpartum.



GETTY IMAGES

Dr Annabel Sowemimo said evidence did not support the view that long-term use of hormone contraception could cause infertility

Dr Sowemimo said she had other concerns about technology being used for the natural fertility awareness method.

"The issue with some of the apps that we see, they're subscription based, so they are a full-profit method of contraception," she said.

"They have the benefit of inflating or making it seem more effective than it is.

"Some of the developments we see also, they have real potential, but they are going to market far too soon before they have a reliable evidence base.

"That's because there's a lot of pressure from investors."

Dr Sowemimo said social media had played a role in influencing some women not to use hormone contraception.

"With the rise of TikTok, people are sharing information that is making people a bit more wary of contraception side effects so it is a trend that is very clear," she said.

She said the suggestion that long-term use of hormone contraception could cause infertility was not correct.

"People are fearful, particularly because we are having kids later and later," she said.

"The bigger impact is likely people's dwindling fertility in your late-to-mid 30s, rather than the impact of contraception on your fertility."

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New app helping young people get free condoms



NO WORRIES WILTSHIRE

Young people can also get advice about sexual health

8 August 2024

A council is providing an app for young people to help them find places where they can get free condoms and find more information about sexual health.

Wiltshire Council is working with Provide Digital to launch the eC-Card app in the county.

It is an addition to the No Worries service in Wiltshire, which offers 13 - 24 year olds advice and support around sexual health.

Young people do not need to be registered with a specific GP practice for an appointment.

Kate Blackburn, Director for Public Health for Wiltshire, said: "Empowering young people to have a respectful approach and positive outlook to sexuality and sexual relationships is an important part of personal development."

She said it is a "discreet" and confidential service and a safe space to ask questions.

No Worries - which was recently re-commissioned with extra providers in Wiltshire - also offers emergency contraception, pregnancy testing and chlamydia self-testing kits.

Wiltshire Council now wants to get more places such as colleges, schools and libraries signed up to distribute condoms.

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OnlyFans, porn, and the fall in teen condom use



SARAH PEART

Sarah Peart says the healthy relationship service at YMCA Cardiff can help to address some of the gaps in knowledge for young people

Jenny Rees

Health correspondent, BBC Wales News

30 December 2024

Updated 31 December 2024

Could the influence of pornography, OnlyFans and so-called "natural family planning" techniques explain the drop in teenagers' use of condoms?

YMCA sexual health educator Sarah Peart said some boys were not willing to use them "because they're not seeing that in pornography".

She said young girls were often "targeted on social media" by those endorsing hormone-free, period-tracking apps to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

Young people have also said that controversial OnlyFans adult content creators set poor examples, who made headlines after bragging of having sex with several young men in a day.

Footage also emerged of one OnlyFans creator saying she had not used condoms during oral sex, putting her at risk of HIV.

"We've had multiple young people say "natural family planning" is their main form of contraception," said Ms Peart, adding that the lack of positive role models and influencers was a challenge for those providing sex education.

The YMCA sessions at schools, colleges and youth services attempt to inform, bust myths, discuss healthy relationships, but also hammer home the message that pregnancy is not the only risk.

"It's such a difficult barrier convincing young people that birth control isn't enough, and that you do need to protect yourself from STIs (sexually transmitted infections)."

She added they would also explain that "natural family planning" was not always reliable, "especially at that age when maybe periods aren't regular and young people don't tend to be the most strict with keeping notes".

"Our sessions also cover pornography and OnlyFans does sometimes come up as a strand of that.

"We try to educate young people to make their own healthy choices - and hopefully that includes not opening an OnlyFans account, but we can only provide the education."



Mason Down (left) and Dylan Steggles, both 18, say embarrassment around the topic is still a real factor for many young people

When BBC Wales asked young people for their thoughts, while many were too uncomfortable to speak publicly, most said buying condoms was seen as too embarrassing.

Liz Vieira, 20, from Llandysul, Ceredigion, said the decline in use of condoms - reported by the **World Health Organization** - did not surprise her given the prominence of adult content creators and their attitudes towards risk.

"I guess it's up to them, but as long as it's not meaning women in relationships are having a hard time. Because it sends a message it's OK to use women as you please. I don't think that's a good thing," she said.

Mason Down and Dylan Steggles, from Cardiff, said sex education in school was also limited.

"We only had two days of it at school," said 18-year-old Dylan. "And that was only an hour or two each time."

"There's more of that content online now [porn] so you can easily access it at a young age, which might influence how young people feel about condoms," said Mason.

The sessions delivered by YMCA for young people include information on the C-Card scheme, which is a supported service across the UK, providing training on sexual health awareness, as well as free condoms, lubrication and dental dams.

"Condoms are really expensive, so it's a fantastic service to make them accessible, but also acceptable, and not some weird, dark hidden corner of the pub toilets," said Ms Peart.

She is aware of fears the scheme could be seen as encouraging under-age sex but said research suggested more information at a younger age was likely to delay that.

"We try and persuade them to wait until they're at least 16. But if they are going to, then we can make sure they can do it in a safe way."



| Ellie Whelan (left) and Megan Grimley say they couldn't remember sex education at school

The World Health Organization recently reported that 56% of 15-year-old girls in Wales, and 49% of boys, had not used a condom the last time they had sex.

It comes amid a rise in STIs in the past year: 22% in chlamydia, 127% in gonorrhoea, and 14% in syphilis.

Ellie Whelan and Megan Grimley, both 21, from Cardiff, said the move away from condoms surprised them given more of their peers had turned away from the pill or coil as forms of contraception.

Use of **long-acting, reversible contraception** - such as an intra-uterine device (IUD) or hormonal implant - has fallen 22% in the last five years, with terminations up by a third.

"I think it's a lot to do with false information or bad experiences - or people are too scared to get information and talk about it," said Megan.

How do I know if I have an STI?

Testing is the best way to find out if you have a sexually transmitted infection.

The Sexual Health Wales service offers a free test kit for over-16s which can be sent and returned by post or collected from community venues.

Sexual health clinics across Wales also provide testing and support.

Infections can take several weeks after contact to show up in a test.

HIV takes seven weeks to be detected, hepatitis C and B can take 12 weeks or more, and chlamydia and gonorrhoea can show up within a fortnight.

But it is not solely an issue for young adults. Ms Peart said the YMCA sessions explain the range of contraception available, but at the back of most classrooms is a teacher also taking notes, as the gap in STI knowledge in particular is on "a national, societal level".

It is also reflected in the rise in sexually transmitted infections in the over-40s, according to Public Health Wales's Zoe Couzens, as people enter new relationships after divorce or bereavement.

"And I'm not putting an upper age on that – we've had a 72-year-old with chlamydia," she said.

"It's about ensuring the message goes out across all age groups.

"But the issue for the women especially is that pregnancy is not the concern they have any more, so they're not going to take the precautions. So that's another group that needs to be educated."

Arguably the rise in cases is a result of increased testing, as the free **"test and post"** service by Public Health Wales has made that far more accessible.

"Chlamydia is the most common [STI] in Wales, followed by gonorrhoea – and while it's all treatable with antibiotics, gonorrhoea is a nasty little bug that is developing resistance to antibiotics.

"Twenty years ago we had two cases of syphilis in Wales – last year it was 507.

"It tends to be a silent infection, but it can develop into neuro syphilis and cause cardiac problems."

Given other STIs can cause infertility, pain and pelvic inflammatory disease, the notion they are easily remedied is one many professionals wish to tackle.

How do you get a sexually transmitted infection?

- **Chlamydia** is passed on through unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex, sharing sex toys, or genital-to-genital contact
- **Gonorrhoea** can be spread through oral, vaginal or anal sex without a condom, or the sharing of sex toys

- **HIV** is passed in infected body fluids such as semen, vaginal or rectal secretions, blood and breast milk, and the most common way to pass it on is through sex without a condom or sharing drug equipment
- **Syphilis** is transmitted during unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex, or through sharing sex toys, and it is also possible to pass on from mother to baby
- **Herpes** is highly contagious and is passed by skin-to-skin contact like vaginal, anal or oral sex, sharing sex toys, or oral sex with someone who has a cold sore
- **Genital warts** is shared by skin-to-skin contact, including vaginal or anal sex and by sharing sex toys.

What are the symptoms of an STI?

Chlamydia: often described as a silent infection as most people do not have obvious signs. Symptoms can include pain when urinating, unusual discharge from the vagina, penis or rectum. Women may get pain in the tummy, bleeding during or after sex and in between periods, while men can have pain and swelling in the testicles.

Gonorrhoea: some people have no symptoms, but those who do may have a yellow or green discharge; a burning sensation when they wee and pain or tenderness in the stomach.

Syphilis: many people won't have symptoms. But for those that do, it will start with a small, painless ulcer in the mouth or genitals, followed by a rash. If left untreated, the infection can result in visual impairment, dementia and death. In pregnancy it can also lead to miscarriages, still births and infant mortality.

Herpes: again, some people have no symptoms, but they can include small blisters that burst to leave red, open sores around the genitals, rectum, thighs and buttocks. Blisters and ulcers can also be on the cervix; it can cause vaginal discharge, pain when having a wee, as well as general flu-like symptoms.

Genital warts: in women they start as small, gritty-feeling lumps that become larger. In men the warts will feel firm and raised, with a rough surface. They can be single warts or grow in clusters.

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Fears misinformation behind drop in contraception



Lily, 25, says she was left to her own devices trying to figure out the side effects of the pill when she was 17

Sophie Bott

27 November 2024

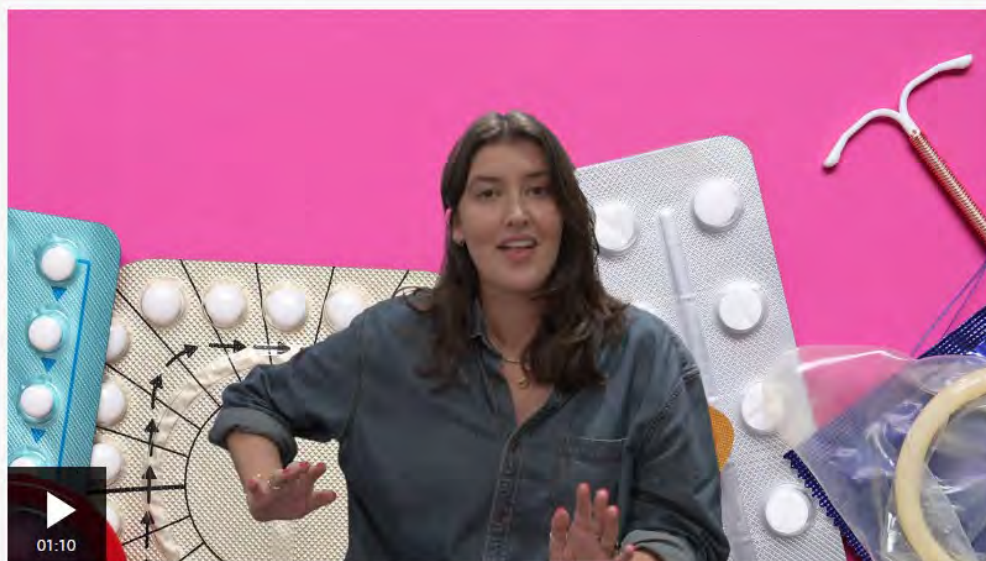
Updated 28 November 2024

Misinformation online could be part of the reason fewer women are taking long-term contraception, experts have said.

Sexual health clinics and GPs in Wales have seen the uptake for the **combined pill** drop from 8,531 in 2019 to 2,233 in 2023, while Public Health Wales data shows **abortions were the highest on record in 2022**.

Wales' lead for women's health said apps such as TikTok and Instagram could be part of the drop in women taking the pill or having **implants, patches** and **hormonal coils**.

TikTok said that users are permitted to share their own stories or experiences about medical treatment as long as it does not contain harmful misinformation.



What are the most common myths about contraception?

Lily Lesh, 25, from Cardiff, said she had never had the implant after being "scared off by the horror stories".

Women sharing their experiences with hormonal contraception has become more popular on TikTok and Instagram.

There are more than 27,000 posts on TikTok using the hashtag #contraception.

In these videos, women tend to discuss their own encounters with side effects such as acne, mood swings and changes in their weight.

The scientist working on male contraceptive pill

30 December 2023



Don't ditch condoms, sexual health experts say

28 September 2023



Doctors warn about social media link to abortion rise

6 September 2023



Dr Helen Munro, clinical lead of the Women's Health Network for Wales, said women wanted to know what was going into their bodies.

She added thousands of women in the UK used the pill for many reasons, including managing symptoms of conditions such as endometriosis.

"It's not just for prevention of pregnancy and it is helping them to be able to live a complete life," she said.

However, she added, "a lot of the information they're getting is coming from social media and perhaps places where there isn't evidence to inform them correctly".

Lily said she did not have all the side effects of the pill explained to her before being prescribed it when she was 17.

She said: "I was just given this box with this massive thick leaflet in it. I had to go and do my own research."

Lily found out what she needed "through my peers and other people on social media" and found people's stories "really helpful to me as a young person" but acknowledged social media could highlight more extreme cases of side effects.

"Sometimes it can be easy to get scared off by the horror stories," said Lily.

"I've never gotten the implant because the stories have completely put me off, but then I've spoken to friends and they've had really good experiences - so it really depends."

She added social media could be helpful for understanding other people's lived experiences.



| Emily Solman is a Welsh content creator with more than 250,000 followers

Emily Solman hosts a podcast with her best friend, covering everything from "relationships to menstrual cycles, hormones and having babies".

She spoke about her contraception choices on the podcast and Instagram after going more than a year without having a period.

This led to her Instagram being "flooded" with questions about hormones and contraception, from her thoughts on it, to the best ones or if others should use it at all.

"Basically all the questions that you would stereotypically ask your doctor. I am not a doctor. I specialise in nutrition, not contraception options.

"We're all different, we all have different bodies, we all have different hormone levels and what if what works for your favourite influencers hormones doesn't quite work for yours?"



| Dr Helen Munro says women are now asking more questions than ever about contraception choices

Dr Munro said people getting their information from social media "could be coming to incorrect decisions around contraception".

She added there was a need for sexual health experts to make evidence-based information "more accessible and I think healthcare professionals and health organisations are waking up to that".

This included sharing more good experiences about different contraception on social media.

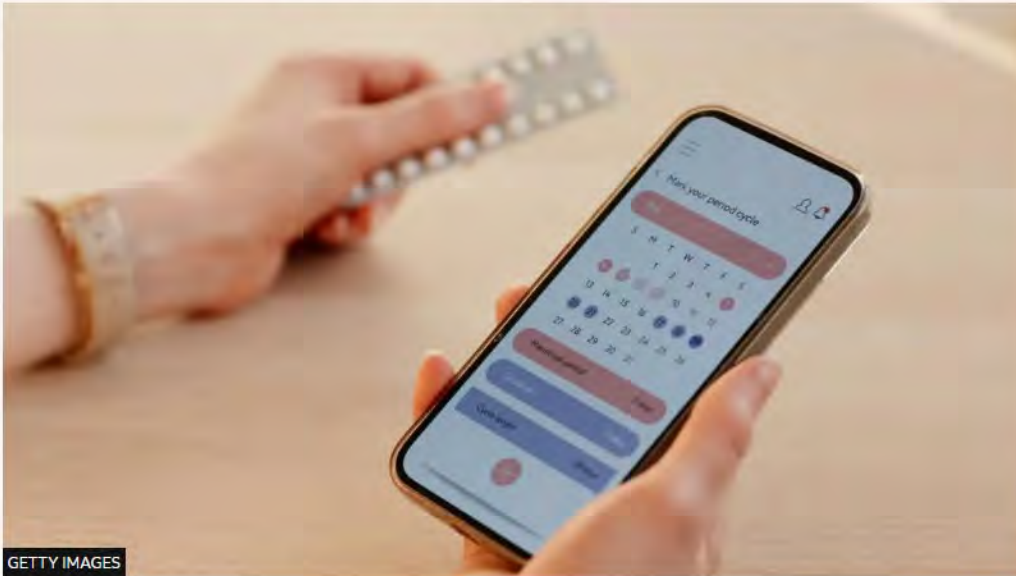
The Welsh government urged people to use verified sources such as **Sexual Health Wales Online** to help them inform their decisions.

It said it had "strengthened access to sexual and reproductive services by providing services online as well as through GPs, pharmacies, and sexual health clinics".

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Women seeking abortions after using 'natural' contraception

**Michelle Roberts**

Digital health editor, BBC News

14 January 2025

There has been a rise in the proportion of women seeking abortions despite using "natural" methods to prevent pregnancy, like fertility tracking apps, a study in England and Wales suggests.

The data, published in **BMJ Sexual and Reproductive Health**, shows a "shift" in contraception use in the last five years, from "more reliable" hormonal contraceptives such as the pill, to "fertility awareness-based methods", say researchers.

Hormonal methods, including the mini pill, fell from 19% in 2018 to 11% in 2023 among tens of thousands of women.

Use of natural methods, meanwhile, increased from 0.4% to 2.5% - still a minority but a significant rise that "needs investigating", say experts.

- **What lies behind the rise of the contraception app?**
- **Period trackers 'coercing' women into sharing risky information**

Fertility apps help track fertile days so a woman can know when she would be most likely to get pregnant each month or menstrual cycle.

They rely on measurements like body temperature to predict ovulation (when an egg is released from the ovary).

Companies say they can be as much as 93% reliable when used correctly.

However, they require people to take readings and control when they have sex, avoiding intercourse on days when the app tells them that they may be fertile.

The NHS says if you do not follow the instructions exactly, the method is only 76% effective. This means 24 in 100 women will get pregnant when tracking their fertility for a year.

In comparison, the pill and the mini pill are 91% effective with "typical use" and 99% effective with "perfect" use.

Hormonal coils or implants, which do not rely on the user remembering to take them, are 99% effective.

For the study, researchers from NHS Forth Valley and the University of Edinburgh compared data from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service for the periods January to June 2018 (33,495 women) and January to June 2023 (55,055 women) to see if contraceptive use changed.

As well as the shift to natural methods, more women reported using no contraceptive at all in 2023 - 70% compared to 56% in 2018.

It is impossible to say what is driving the trends, but difficulty accessing sexual health services during the Covid pandemic may be a factor, say the study authors.

Lead researcher Dr Rosie McNee told the BBC: "Something that really needs scrutiny is the surge in the use of ehealth, including fertility apps and period trackers.

"The market has exploded. There are hundreds of them and some are more reliable than others. Plus you don't need a prescription, and so you may not get all the information you need."

She said some tracking apps are designed to track periods rather than fertility or family planning.

Abortion provider MSI Reproductive Choices UK told the BBC it too has seen more women using fertility awareness methods.

Tanya Lane, contraception lead, explained: "This could be a result of the rise in popularity of social media platforms like TikTok, which has seen more people sharing their experiences...and content creators doing paid partnerships with brands of fertility awareness methods that might be influencing people to choose this option.

Long waits for appointments at GP surgeries and sexual health clinics could also be a factor.

"People are waiting months for appointments in some areas of the UK, especially for long-acting methods like the coil and implant."

She said that any woman thinking of switching to fertility tracking should speak to a medical professional.

Dr Melanie Davis-Hall, Medical Director at women's health review platform The Lowdown, said: "The key here is to reduce the spread of misinformation and the use of apps and methods that are not approved fertility awareness methods so people know they are equivalent to not using contraception. Then we need to address why people are ditching hormonal and non hormonal contraception and the role the spread of misinformation plays in this."

Paula Baraitser, medical director of the NHS-partnered free sexual health service provider SH:24, said there could be many reasons why women are switching, including concerns about future fertility and possible side effects.

The risks can range from mild side effects to rare but potentially serious complications.

She told the BBC: "Many people will use contraception for 30 years of their lives.

"People's experience of hormonal contraception is highly variable and ultimately we need a larger choice of methods to enable people to find one that suits them.

"There have been few new methods of contraception in the last 50 years, reflecting a lack of investment in research in this area."

The sexual health charity Brook said many women use hormonal contraception not simply to prevent pregnancy, but to manage their menstrual health, to make periods lighter and more predictable.

"These benefits need to be part of the wider conversation about hormones," said spokeswoman Lisa Hallgarten.

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'Pregnancy is a risk I'm willing to take': Why some women are ditching the pill



GETTY IMAGES

Some women are ditching pills and coils for fertility apps

Michelle Roberts, Digital health editor, BBC News and Rozina Sini, BBC News

18 January 2025

When the BBC reported a shift in contraception use from "hormonal" products like the pill to "natural" fertility tracking apps among some women seeking abortions, many other women got in touch sharing their experiences.

Their stories reveal how difficult it can be to find birth control that fits your lifestyle and has acceptable side effects.

There are pros and cons with all types, health experts advise.

A method that suited you when you were 18 might not when you are 28, 38 or 48, says Paula Baraitser, medical director of the NHS-partnered free sexual health service provider SH:24.

Fertility tracking apps are a relatively new option that some people are using.

They use measurements like body temperature to predict ovulation so the user knows when she would be most likely to get pregnant each month or menstrual cycle and can avoid sex or use a condom on those days.

Trial and error

Dr Baraitser says some of the patients she sees have switched to the apps after struggling on hormonal treatments like the pill.

"Taking hormones changes your body and people are very individual in their responses, positive and negative.

"For example, oestrogen often reduces acne and combined hormonal methods, like the combined pill, patch or ring, help control your bleeding.

"On the other hand people might experience mood changes or changes to their libido."

She says it can be a process of trial and error, switching between methods until you find something that suits you.

Condoms are the only type of contraception that can both prevent pregnancy and protect against most sexually transmitted infections.



GETTY IMAGES

The BBC heard from women about their experiences, none of them are identified or pictured in this article to protect their anonymity.

Georgia, is 25 and from Bristol. She has been using a fertility tracking app for the last seven months.

She says her mental wellbeing improved massively when she came off the pill, which she had been taking for around a decade.

Georgia is aware that, unless used carefully, there is the risk of unwanted pregnancy but says "it's a risk I'm willing to take to let my body be how it should be".

"[On the pill] I struggled a lot with my moods, I felt completely out of control. After I decided to come off the pill I did notice a massive difference in my ability to regulate emotions, how I'm feeling about life and about myself.

"I looked at the copper IUD but the heavy bleeding put me off. I already get heavy periods so going onto something that could make them worse felt wrong.

"I was conscious that for a long time I had been altering my body's hormones. It bothered me a lot and I didn't want to continue to do that.

"I'm a personal trainer and work a lot with women. It's extremely frustrating the research is so dated.

"If you go to the GP, a doctor might say 'try this'. But for you to know if a contraceptive is working for your body, you sometimes have to wait months.

"It's come to the point now where [using a tracking app] is a risk I'm willing to take to let my body be how it should be."

'Stakes too high'

Emily, who is 39 and from Glasgow, had an abortion in 2021 after finding out she was pregnant while using a tracking app as contraception.

In 2018 she came off the pill which she'd been on since the age of 17, initially to control acne.

"My mood was low, I was putting weight on and I couldn't lose it. I was experiencing symptoms like low libido. I gave it a break and as soon as I came off it I felt infinitely better," Emily said.

Looking for a non-hormonal alternative and wanting to avoid the experience of having a coil fitted, she chose to use the menstrual cycle tracking feature on her iPhone Health app.

In 2021 she found out she was two months pregnant with her then partner of four months - who is now her husband.

Emily said: "I got a urine infection which kicked my cycle out of sync a little bit. Before I knew it a couple of months passed and I'd not had a period. I felt really unwell one day and thought either this is Covid, or I'm pregnant. I went home and took a test for both. The pregnancy test came back positive.

She says her partner, now husband, was amazing.

"We spoke about it and read lots of resources online. We barely knew each other at the time and didn't live together so we decided we couldn't go ahead and have a child."

Following the termination, she decided to try a different contraceptive.

"[With tracking apps] I know your cycle needs to be really regular and really consistent. I didn't want to gamble that risk again," she said.

She opted for the the non-hormonal copper coil.

"I've always had lower back pain but, since the coil, on my periods that is now worse. And I now get pain during ovulation. It's not ideal, but it is what it is.

"It enrages me that in this day and age there's so much medical research in other areas, but then we have a contraceptive pill over 50 years old and this barbaric coil insertion procedure."

'Better choices for women'

Freya, who is 26, came off hormonal contraception in an attempt to see if it might help her mental health.

"I had been on it since I was 15 or so, so I didn't really 'know myself' without it.

"I opted to use condoms during the times when the app said I would be at risk of pregnancy.

"I ended up pregnant within three months and opted for an abortion which I found extremely distressing mentally and physically.

"The fact I'd been using the app instead of my normal contraception made me feel as though I couldn't tell anyone."

She says the experience has put her off using natural contraception again because "the stakes feel too high."

Alice, is 41 and from Farnborough. She had side effects while on the pill, including low libido, weight gain, mood swings and bleeding.

"I now have a daughter and I feel sad about her future.

"Why do women and girls have to bear the responsibility of not getting pregnant.

"Immediately after giving birth you are asked what kind of contraception do you want.

"Luckily my husband is fine with condoms... and now I use a fertility app to just track my period but I don't rely on it."

For people interested in fertility tracker apps, there are some things to consider:

- There are lots of apps but **only one licensed fertility app for contraceptive use** in the UK
- Period trackers are not the same and have not been designed to predict when you ovulate or might be fertile
- If your menstrual cycles are not the same length every month the days of your cycle when you are fertile might change
- If you have a very irregular cycle then apps may find it more difficult to predict your fertility

- You must follow the app instructions correctly for it to be as reliable as possible
- If you are monitoring body temperature then how you do it is important

Dr Baraitser explained: "After ovulation your temperature goes up - but by a very small amount.

"To pick up a difference this small, you have to measure your temperature whenever the app tells you to, often daily, and you need to do this before you have got out of bed in the morning and before you have eaten or have had anything to drink. If you have a busy life, if you work nights, if you have young children this may be hard to do."

New technologies that monitor temperature continuously - such as wrist temperature measured by a smart watch - may help with this, she said.

The app can only tell you when to have sex and when not to. It's up to you to remember and act on the advice.

Anatole Menon-Johansson is clinical director at Brook which has sexual health clinics around the UK. He said weighing the chance of having an unintended pregnancy was important to consider.

He advised: "Find a provider that will listen to you and allow you to explore and experiment with contraceptive methods.

"It will sometimes take a few attempts to find the best one for you."

Companies say apps can be as much as 93% reliable when used correctly, meaning 7 in every 100 women would get pregnant when tracking their fertility for a year.

That is slightly better than the **91% seen with typical** or less than perfect use of the pill and the mini pill.

Perfect use of the pill increases the success rate to 99% - similar to hormone-releasing coils or implants, which do not rely on the user remembering to take them.