

Sexual Health

Meet the Male Birth Control Activists

By DANIELLE FRIEDMAN

Photographs by THE VOORHES



IF DANE FORST NEVER HAD TO WEAR A CONDOM again, he'd be a happy man. But the Portland, Oregon, graphic designer doesn't want kids anytime soon and knows that his fiancée has had to carry the burden of their birth control for three-and-a-half years. The lack of contraceptive options for men has left him frustrated, wondering, Why isn't there an equivalent to the Pill for men?

"My whole adult life, I've had this kind of weird, powerless feeling" around preventing pregnancy, says Forst, 34. That's why, for the past several years, he has not only tracked the development of a new male birth control—an injectable called Vasalgel that would temporarily prevent the release of sperm—but also donated money to researchers and offered to participate in clinical trials.

Since the Pill first debuted in the 1960s, dozens more birth control options for women have been developed, including the patch, the implant, the shot, the vaginal ring, and five IUDs. Men still have basically three options: condoms, vasectomies, and the pull-and-pray (the latter, for most, is not a great option). "We're neglecting 50 percent of our population by not having new methods for men," says Stephanie Page, M.D., Ph.D., an endocrinologist at the University of Washington School of Medicine and a leader in the effort to develop hormonal birth control for men.

Despite years of headlines about a possible male Pill (even in this magazine), researchers say any new male contraceptive is still five to 10 years away. One reason for the lag: a perceived lack of interest. Proponents say they're up against deeply ingrained cultural attitudes that contraception is a women's issue. But 13 years ago, an international study by researchers in Berlin suggested nearly half of men in the U.S. would be on board with using a new contraceptive, if one were available. Now some are starting to demand it. "The Pill came out during a time of very traditional gender roles," says Deb Levine, interim executive director of Male Contraception Initiative in North Carolina. "We're in a really different place now, culturally and socially."

Momentum is starting to build: A biotech start-up is racing to develop a competing version of the gel Forst supports. Scientists at the University of Washington and Harbor-UCLA are running clinical trials for other methods—a pill, a transdermal gel, and an injection—that would temporarily inhibit sperm production. And the National Institutes of Health will soon embark on a major global trial of a different gel that would inhibit testosterone to halt sperm production. (Experts estimate that if a new male birth control method were to come out in the next five years, it would be a \$1 billion business by 2024.) →

Perhaps most important, men are starting to rally behind these options, saying they want birth control and they want it now. And man, do their reasons sound familiar.

“I want the freedom to achieve my dreams.” —MIRACLE DIALA

Young men are more likely than previous generations to want to be equal partners at home, so it makes sense that some are hyperaware of how parenthood would impact their personal and professional aspirations. Miracle Diala, 22, first learned about male birth control while researching it for a college oratory competition. He wound up winning a national tournament with his speech in favor of developing a nonhormonal method for men and has remained an advocate for it since. First he plans to attend medical school; next up, he hopes to return to his father's home village in Nigeria and bring medical care to the community. “The prospect of ruining that [goal] due to a mistake is honestly frightening,” he says. Diala, who lives outside of Chicago, believes male birth control would offer men what the Pill made possible for women decades ago. “They were able to have that agency, to know for sure they would be able to control their own fertility,” he says. “Anything I could do to secure my plans would be a godsend.”

“I want kids...when the time is right.” —DANIEL DUDLEY

The stakes of having penis-in-vagina sex will always be higher for women, but plenty of men take the risk of unintended pregnancy seriously, enough that it impacts the quality of the experience. “Sex can almost feel like some-

thing to fear,” says Harrison Wiesert, 20, a Eugene, Oregon, musician who learned about Vasalgel three years ago and has been following its progress through the product's Facebook page. “I have had many friends make one mistake, and now they are fathers. No one deserves that amount of responsibility for sharing love with someone else.”

Several men *Glamour* spoke to said money is a key motivator—they want to avoid becoming parents before they're able to provide for a kid. “I'm busy with school right now; my partner's busy with school right now,” says Daniel Dudley, M.D., 28, a family medicine resident physician in Seattle. “I want to be a parent someday, but I'd want to be more financially stable and have more resources to support the family.” He's not even entertaining the idea of kids until he's done working overnight shifts during his residency. “I see in my patients so often that when a pregnancy is unplanned, the family suffers,” he says. Meanwhile, he has participated in three different clinical trials for hormonal birth control at the University of Washington—slathering himself daily with a topical gel for one, receiving a butt injection for another, and taking two pills a day for a month for the third. (In case you're wondering: He didn't mind any of the methods, but says the injection was the most convenient.)

“It's my last hope for not having to use the barrier method.” —RICARDO VIERA

Women have long understood the importance of having choices about their reproductive health. Proponents of male birth control, like Ricardo Viera, 40, want the same—namely, a method they'd find less cumbersome than condoms and less invasive than a vasectomy.

When Viera's wife was pregnant with their third child (his fourth), they agreed it would be their last. “Four is enough!” says the Southern California real estate and property manager. His wife didn't react well to her hormonal IUD, so she suggested Viera look into a vasectomy. He doesn't love the idea of severing his tubes, so if a clinical trial for a new method were to come to his area, he says, “I'd be the first one there, with bells on.”

“I want control over my reproductive rights.” —DEVIN PATTERSON

Several of the men we spoke with were also aware of the issues their partners had experienced while on birth control. “I'd take a pill to prevent my partner from experiencing side effects of contraception,” says Dudley. “There are so many small things she does to support me; this would be just another way I could support her.” Gender equality and equal access to health care came up again and again in the (admittedly enlightened) men we spoke to. “It's not a female reproductive rights issue; it's not a male reproductive rights issue,” says Devin Patterson, 33, an architect in Grand Rapids, Michigan, who's been championing male birth control among friends since he was in college. “It's a human issue.” Women agree. ●

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