

# Birth Control Study

Online Community Research

November 2020

Research for:

XXX

# Research Design

1

**Phase 1 - Quantitative.** Using data collected in 2019 as a starting point, we conducted online research to track the 2019 findings and better understand the awareness and preference of different contraceptives; obstacles to accessing them; and familiarity with – and motivations or barriers to using – hormonal IUDs. Using the field services of Gazelle Global, we surveyed 1,000 American women 18-34, weighted to be representative of current census data, plus an additional 200 women who were self-reported current users of hormonal IUDs.

2

**Phase 2 - Qualitative.** To gain an in-depth understanding of women’s feelings around birth control, we conducted a 3-day online bulletin board with 19 women 18-34, who were a mix of race/ethnicity, education, and region. All women had to have used birth control at some point, and all had to have faced barriers to access at some point. Using the platform services of HatchTank, the board was live from October 27 – 29, 2020.

# Meet Our Respondents



## BRENDA J.

- 29 years old
- CA - Suburban
- 4-yr college
- Latina
- Current User
- Copper IUD



## BRENNA F.

- 21 years old
- IA - Suburban
- Some college
- Latina
- Current User
- Hormonal IUD



## BRITTANY G.

- 29 years old
- UT - Suburban
- 4-yr college
- White
- Current User
- Vasectomy



## JASMINE A.

- 32 years old
- OK - Suburban
- 4-yr college
- Black, White
- Current User
- Hormonal IUD



## JULIANE A.

- 23 years old
- FL - Urban
- 4-yr college
- Latina
- Current User
- Contraceptive pills,  
Male condoms



## JULIANNE A.

- 19 years old
- SC - Urban
- Some college
- Latina
- Current User
- Contraceptive pills



## KARRIEMAH B.

- 23 years old
- NY - Suburban
- Some college
- Black
- Past User



## KELLY C.

- 26 years old
- OH - Suburban
- High school
- White
- Past User



## LAUREL M.

- 33 years old
- MA - Suburban
- Some college
- White
- Past User

## Meet Our Respondents (cont'd)



**MARY M.**

- 31 years old
- MO - Rural
- High school
- White
- Past User



**PATRICIA J.**

- 31 years old
- NJ - Suburban
- 4-yr college
- Asian
- Current User
- Male condoms



**SAMANTHA P.**

- 31 years old
- CA - Suburban
- Post-graduate
- Black, White
- Current User
- Male condoms



**SHANIA T.**

- 23 years old
- OH – Urban
- Some college
- White
- Current User
- Implantable rod



**SHARON M.**

- 23 years old
- TX – Urban
- Post-graduate
- Latina
- Current User
- Contraceptive pills



**SHERAELYN B.**

- 24 years old
- AZ – Urban
- 4-yr college
- Black
- Current User
- Shot/injection



**SYMPHONY C.**

- 22 years old
- VA – Suburban
- Some college
- Black
- Current User
- Copper IUD



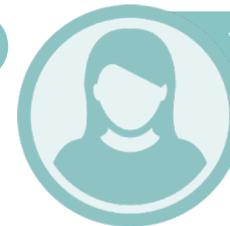
**TAYLOR L.**

- 24 years old
- IL – Rural
- Some college
- White
- Past User



**TAYLOR W.**

- 25 years old
- GA – Suburban
- 4-yr college
- White
- Current User
- Hormonal IUD



**YESENIA B.**

- 29 years old
- CO – Suburban
- 2-yr college
- Latina
- Past User

1

**Birth control experiences in the beginning, especially for younger women, are difficult.** Many young women feel uncomfortable speaking to or unsupported by their mothers. Feelings around their first experiences with birth control are often negative, with many women feeling lost or scared. Most women who start birth control at younger ages do so to help with period pain or side effects, and the pill is often prescribed without providing other options.

2

**As time goes on, many women report being able to access birth control more easily and feel more in control.** As women mature into more independent lifestyles, they often find themselves in a new era when it comes to birth control. They have learned from the past and are more knowledgeable and empowered to take control of finding the right methods for their bodies – but they know that barrier-free access is never guaranteed forever (i.e., insurance changes, cost, unforeseen circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.).

3

**Women hope for easier access in the future for themselves and other women, and hope the stigma around birth control goes away.** When asked what they hope for in the future, even those who are accessing birth control today without barriers, say they wish for easier access for themselves and all women. They want to see more options for young women to access birth control without their parents' permission, and they see birth control as a tool to help them achieve major life goals especially around family planning, and careers.



# Starting the Birth Control Journey

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Many women start using birth control at the end of high school.

## Top Reasons They Started Using Birth Control

18

### MEDIAN AGE

women **started using**  
birth control

**Youngest** reported:  
"12 or 13" years old

**Oldest** reported:  
29 years old

### Painful Periods

*"I first started using birth control when I was 18 and **tired of having very heavy periods and horrible cramps.**"*

– Brenna F.

*"I first started using birth control when I was 17 years old because **my period cramps became debilitating. Like I had to stay home because I was throwing up from the pain debilitating.**"*

– Taylor W.

### Becoming Sexually Active

*"I was around 21 and I was **starting to become more sexually active** after starting a relationship with my then boyfriend."*

– Samantha P.

*"I was 18 when I was first able to access birth control. I was prompted to seek birth control because **I had been sexually active for a few years and had wanted to use birth control before, but was unable to access it due to cost and availability without insurance.**"*

– Laurel M.

For many women, the pill is the entry point into birth control usage.

## The Journey



1



Most women start off by first trying **birth control pills**

2



The usually speak to a:

- **Doctor**
- **Friend**
- **Significant other**
- **Mom**

*A handful report looking up information on YouTube, and a few relied on medical services offered by their universities*

3



Many struggled with their first experience and describe it as...

“ *Scary / Necessary / Better than expected / Bad / Fail / Okay / Boring / Frustrating / Confusing / Long-awaited / Roller coaster / Nerve-wracking / Unfamiliar / All this information – wow!* ”

Barriers to access are common for first-time birth control users and make them feel alone.

## TOP BARRIERS\*

**1** Didn't feel **comfortable** having open conversations about sex or birth control with family

*"I definitely felt kind **of alone and isolated**. I didn't have any other lady friends at the time that I could really talk about it with...so that made it **hard**. And I didn't feel comfortable at all talking about it with my mom since she's very prudish and she would have judged me hard! So that made me feel **shameful** and **embarrassed**. When I went to look up information online I tried to be really **secretive** and hide everything from [my mom]..." – Samantha P.*

**2** Didn't know what their **options** were

*"I didn't even realize there were other options until a couple of years later. By then, I felt **overwhelmed, angry, and curious**." – Taylor W.*

**3** Felt restricted due to **cultural and/or religious stigma**

*"I felt **angry** and I felt **scared**. It was all just so **frustrating**; why CAN'T we talk about this? My mom didn't plan to have my sister, so you would think we would care about being open and honest with these things..." – Julianne A.*

*\*Aided list of barriers provided to respondents based off a quantitative tracking research study*

# Women wish they could have talked more freely about birth control.

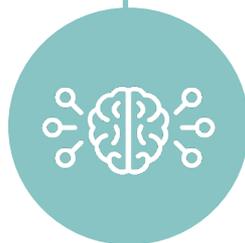
## When I was starting on birth control I wish....



**I could have openly talked about it/there was less stigma**

*"I wish I had been supported by my family and been able to talk about my situation."  
– Julianne A.*

*"I wish I wasn't scared about what the doctor might think of me."  
– Taylor W.*



**I had known all my options**

*"I wish I could have weighed all my birth control options."  
– Karriemah B.*

*"I wish I had information about where to get birth control."  
– Yesenia B.*



**I knew more about the side effects**

*"Known that low-dosage pills would cause breakthrough bleeding."  
– Sharon M.*

Mothers play a crucial role in young women's first experiences using birth control.

Women read the real-life story of Nora\* and how her mother asked if she wanted to get on birth control, and shared their reactions with us:

*"I was jealous that she could have those convos with her mom, and I couldn't."*  
– Samantha P.

*"I wish my mom was like that."*  
– Taylor W.

*"Wow that's so awkward, but her mom is such a good parent!"*  
– Brenna F.

*"That openness between Nora and her mom is something I wish I had."*  
– Patricia J.



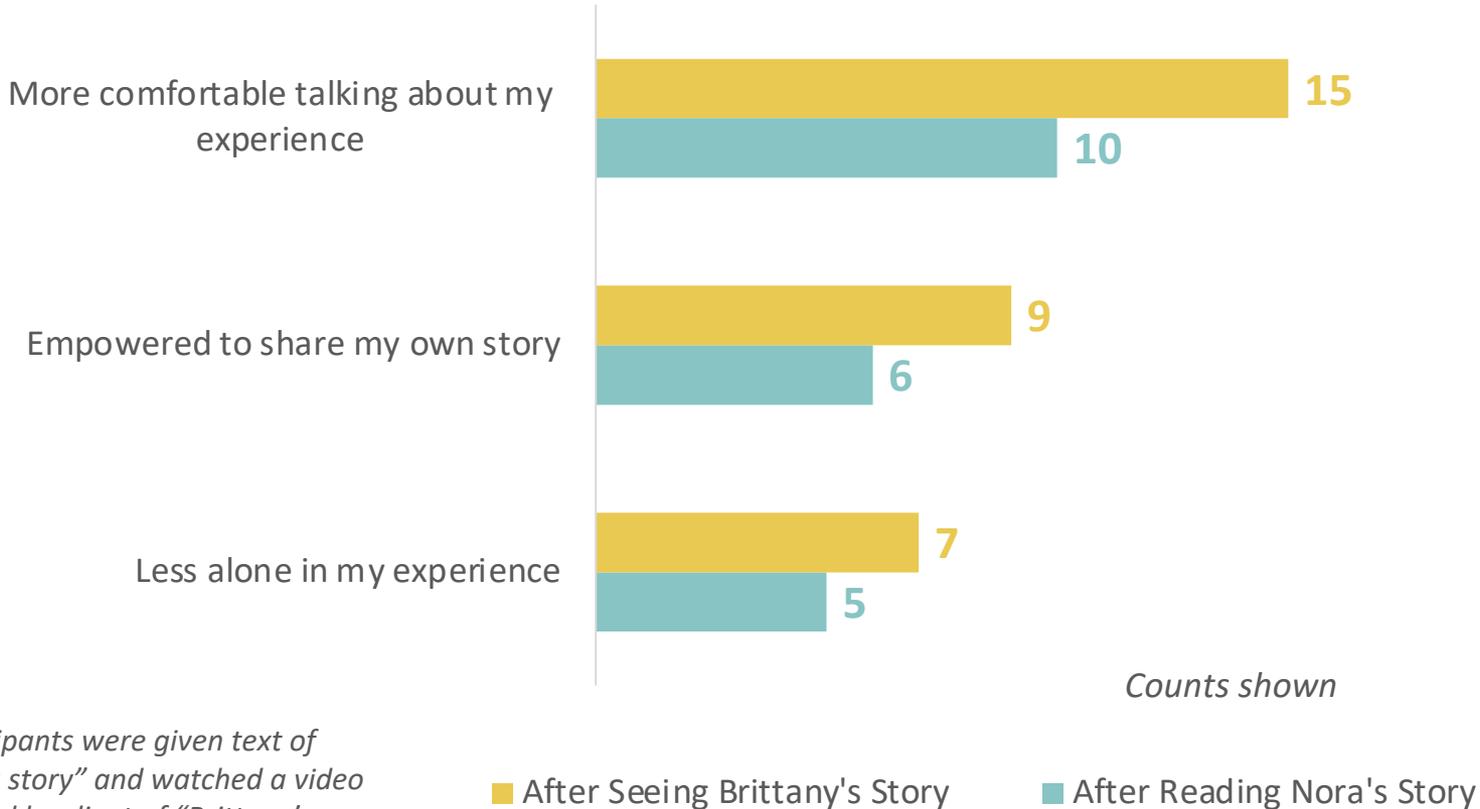
*"What an open line of communication Nora has with her mom. It's lovely."*  
– Symphony C.

\*Participants were given text of "Nora's story" about her experience talking about birth control with her mother.

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Stories about other women’s experiences with birth control are helpful and empowering.

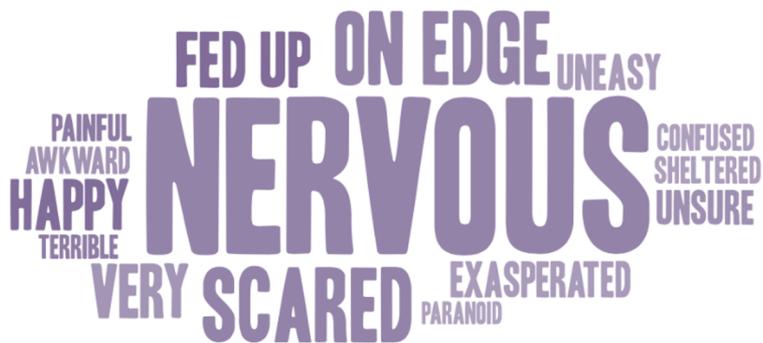
### Reactions After Hearing Or Reading Real Life Stories\*



*\*Participants were given text of “Nora’s story” and watched a video provided by client of “Brittany’s story.” Both stories highlight their experiences with birth control.*

Feelings go from anxiety to relief once women access birth control for the first time.

## Before Using Birth Control For The First Time, I Felt:



A word cloud of negative emotions in shades of purple. The most prominent words are "NERVOUS" and "VERY SCARED". Other words include "FED UP", "ON EDGE", "UNEASY", "PAINFUL", "AWKWARD", "HAPPY", "TERRIBLE", "CONFUSED", "SHELTERED", "UNSURE", "EXASPERATED", and "PARANOID".



## But Afterward, I Felt:



A word cloud of positive emotions in shades of teal. The most prominent words are "RELIEVED" and "CALM". Other words include "CONTROL", "REASSURED", "HAPPY", "STILL", "PREPARED", "DIFFERENCE", "CONFIDENT", "SCARED", "INDIFFERENT", "COMFORTABLE", "PAINLESS", and "MORE FREE".

“Before using birth control for the first time, I felt **very nervous** but afterward I felt **comfortable and free.**”  
-Julianne A.





# Her Birth Control Experience Today

## Current users chose their preferred methods for a variety of reasons.



### Methods like IUDs or implantable rods are often selected because they last longer and do not require taking a daily pill

- *"I chose [an implantable rod] so I wouldn't have to worry about taking the pill everyday....I could get it and forget about it for awhile and be safe." – Shania T.*
- *"I tried NuvaRing for a while and I hated it...and while I didn't have problems with the pill, I was tired of taking it everyday at the same time. I heard the shot made you temperamental...so then my next option was the [copper] IUD." – Brenda J.*



### Condoms are typically used if someone is not having sex regularly and / or for STD prevention

- *"I was never sexually active enough to justify taking birth control pills daily...Also, I would have my partner wear a condom anyway to protect myself so it didn't make sense for me to have to take birth control." – Patricia J.*
- *"I have sex pretty erratically so I didn't feel the need to have the unnecessary drugs if I didn't really need them. I was able to find a comfortable condom that I feel good using so it's not that big of a deal for me." – Samantha P.*



### Those who use the pill cite the low cost and ease as benefits

- *"I wanted to try something easy. Taking a pill everyday seemed easy at the time, and it is...but it's not so easy to remember to take it at the same time." – Sharon M.*
- *"Costs me \$14/month, which is much more doable than a shot, implant, or IUD, none of which I have insurance to cover...also costs less than condoms..." – Julianne A.*

Hormonal IUD users feel relaxed and confident with their choice of an IUD – especially since they often tried other methods in the past.

## Advice Current Hormonal IUD Users Would Give to Others

“Once it’s there **you don’t really have to worry about it**. As long as you can feel the strings you know your IUD hasn’t moved in any way.”  
– Brenna F.

“It would just **depend on their lifestyle**. If they are thinking about having a child in the next two years, I would say it might not be worth it to insert it just to have to get it taken out a year later. **There are pros and cons to the hormonal IUD, just like any other form of birth control. It’s just for me, the pros astronomically outweighed the cons.**”  
– Taylor W.

“**There are not as many complications as what you may have heard** compared to other birth control.”  
– Jasmine A.

There are opportunities to educate women about hormonal IUDs beyond ‘the basics’.



### Most women know the basics of hormonal IUDs

- *“I know some about them, but I don’t feel particularly knowledgeable. I think they work for like 6 years...” – Julianne A.*
- *“I do know that it goes into the uterus and that there are two kinds, progestin and copper. I would like to know how they both compare.” – Sharon M.*
- *“I know they are t-shaped...plastic that is inserted into the uterus for birth control. Also, there are 3 types that range in different sizes but I don’t recall the name.” – Juliane A.*



### However, fear of pain and complications has prevented some from using IUDs

- *“Pain. I have seen so many people go through a lot of pain when using IUDs. Whether it’s extreme cramps, bleeding or hormonal issues.” – Karriemah B.*
- *“...I think of the words ‘emotional,’ ‘quick tempered,’ and ‘mood swings.’ I know that’s a weird connotation for me to have as I was on hormonal pills for years and I never experienced any of those symptoms, but for some reason a ‘hormonal IUD’ sounds different.” – Brenda J.*
- *“Side effects? That’s what comes to mind when I think about IUDs. Could it hurt my insides? Leave permanent damage?” – Kelly C.*



### Some would be more willing to choose them in the future when their lifestyles change

- *“I would consider using one if I was in my early/mid-20s but at my stage in life (early 30s), it doesn’t seem necessary since I want to start a family soon. I would consider using it once I am done having children, since it seems like a very low maintenance, easy birth control option...” – Patricia J.*
- *I think I might consider it if I had more info about how they work and the side effects. Also maybe if I was planning on traveling for a long period of time. I had wanted to plan to attend grad school abroad for a year so I could see this being useful during that time...” – Samantha P.*

Most are not currently facing access issues – but COVID and cost have been barriers for a few.

Do not have access issues currently ~14

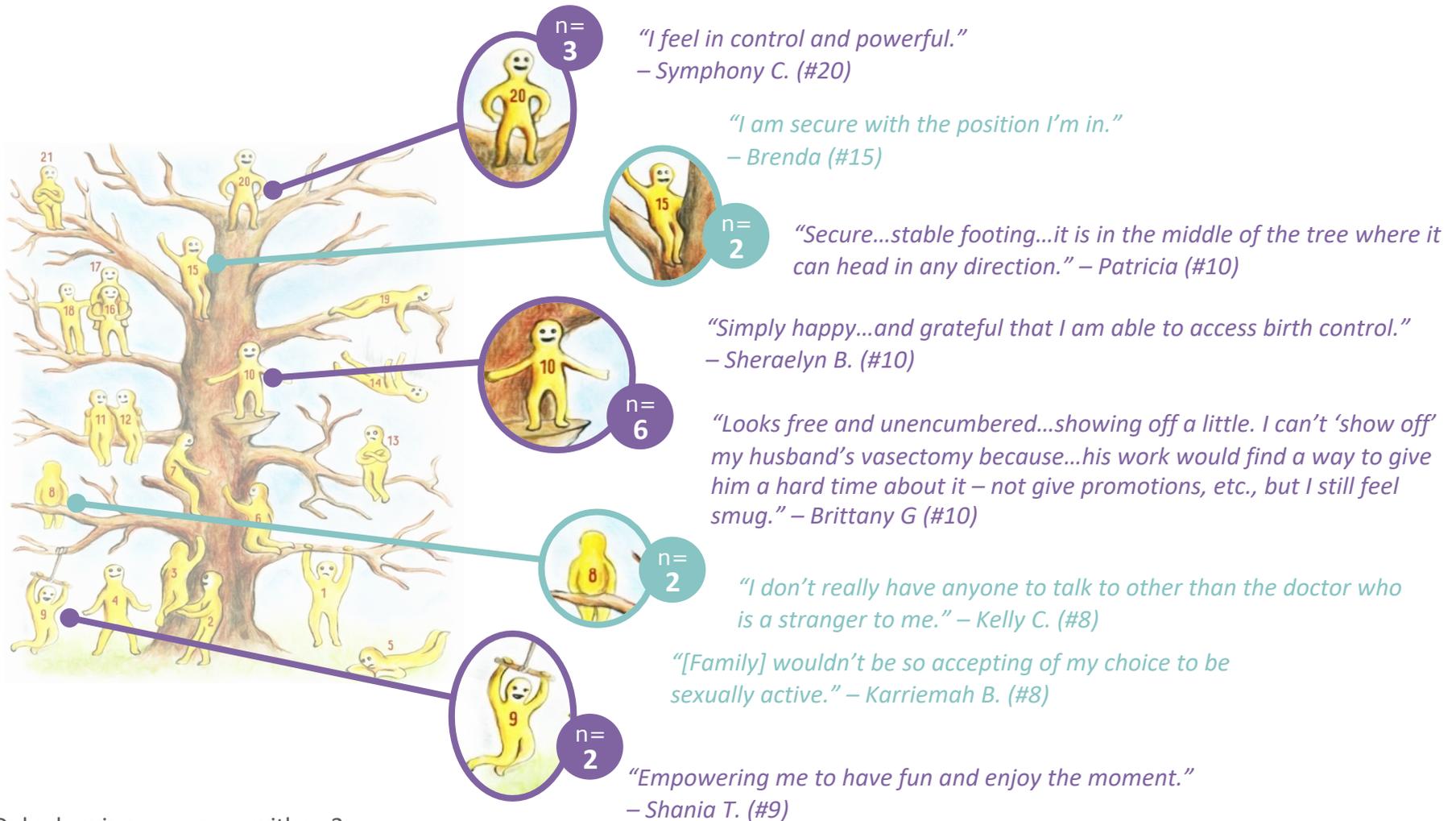
*Especially those using more permanent methods*

- “I feel free and not having to worry about birth control is a big relief.” – Brenna F.
- “I feel in control, gracious, and thankful.” – Symphony C.
- Right now I don’t have issues since the vasectomy is done...I feel so much relief.” – Brittany G.

Have access issues currently ~5

- “Since I dropped out of my university over the summer, I’m really concerned about having my prescription renewed when it runs out...I’m still just not sure how I’ll pay for the visit.” – Julianne A.
- “The pandemic and timing...they can only take so many appointments, and I had to show up earlier than usual to fill out extra forms saying I didn’t have COVID-19....I actually showed up while logged into class during my last appointment, albeit with my mic and camera turned off.” – Taylor W.

# Women without barriers find their birth control experiences to be empowering and positive.



\*Only showing responses with n=2+



## Lessons Learned & Future Goals

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Understanding their own bodies and what works for them is often the greatest lesson learned.

## Life lessons learned

### Everyone is different

- *“What works for someone may not work for me and vice versa, but never give up.” – Brenda J.*

### Many available options

- *“There are lots of options and it may take several tries to find the right one.” – Brittany G.*

### Advocate for oneself

- *“That I have to look out for myself when it comes to my health and to speak up when at the doctors.” – Samantha P.*

## Best advice

### Do what’s right for you

- *“My doctor told me to do what I think is best for myself and my body; forget other people’s opinions because at the end of the day I have to live with my body. If I needed birth control, then that’s the route I needed to do. No one knows your body better than yourself.” – Juliane A.*

### No Shame

- *“My aunt once told me not to be ashamed of it. That it’s a responsible thing to choose.” – Kelly C.*

## Access to birth control helps women achieve their life goals around family and career.

*“I think birth control will help with the prevention of having kids. I don’t want any kids in the future, so I am hoping that birth control will keep up the great work.”*

– Sheraelyn B.

*“Anything I achieve in the future will be thanks to birth control. Having kids had been restrictive to my goals and interests. I’d like to get a Masters Degree and travel around Europe and Asia.”*

– Brittany G.

*“Being on birth control in the future will help me achieve not having kids. Starting a family is not a goal of mine and birth control helps me not do that! Again, I feel powerful, energetic, and reassured.”*

– Symphony C.

*“Using birth control gives me the ability to delay motherhood and allows me to pursue my aspirations. Having been able to build my career and enjoy my 20s, I feel ready to be a mother in my 30s and will be able to be a better mom in the future.”*

– Patricia J.



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In the future, women would like birth control to have no cost and be readily available.

Low cost or no cost birth control

Ability to buy it without a prescription

Removing parental permissions

Better communications and sexual education for younger girls

*"I would love birth control to be easily accessible both in the literal sense and financial sense for all women regardless of their age, economic status or health insurance."* – Laurel M.

*"I would like to see more information given to high school students. I do not remember having any information about free birth control back when I was in high school."*

– Yesenia B.



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