

New birth control methods give options

By Kim Painter

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Leah Sanchez, 26, of Los Angeles is a married woman who wants kids someday, but not now. Crystal Nelson, 31, of St. Louis is single, doesn't have kids and doesn't plan to have any. And Lydia Huston, 44, of Florissant, Mo., is a married mother of three who has decided her family is large enough.

Each woman is using a birth control method gaining new popularity in the U.S.

The methods, known collectively as "long-acting reversible contraceptives" or LARCs, are intrauterine devices (IUDs) and hormonal arm implants.

A decade ago, such methods were used by just 2.4 percent of U.S. women who used any method, but by 2009, they had caught on with 8.5 percent, with IUDs leading the way by a large margin, according to a recent study from the nonprofit Guttmacher Institute. New federal data show the same trend.

That trend is likely to pick up steam in the next few years, family planning experts say.

One reason: Under the new federal health law, insurers must cover all contraceptive methods, meaning the high upfront cost of IUDs and implants (estimated at \$500 to \$1,000) will disappear for many women. Meanwhile, the influential American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has started recommending these methods as first-line contraceptives, not only for adult women but for teens.

The impact could be big, suggests one recent study published in *Obstetrics & Gynecology*: When 9,000 teens and women in the St. Louis area were offered no-cost birth control, 75 percent chose IUDs and implants — and teen pregnancies and abortions fell dramatically, compared to national rates.

Earlier, data from the same study, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, found that IUDs and implants, with a yearly failure rate of



Crystal Nelson cuts Maria Bayless' hair at Annabella's salon in St. Louis. Nelson has an IUD as her birth control method. WHITNEY CURTIS

about 0.3 per 100 users, worked up to 20 times better than hormonal pills, patches and rings to prevent pregnancy among participants — who included Nelson, Huston and Sanchez.

When cost is not a barrier, "we learned what is most important to women is that a method works really well," said researcher Jeffrey Peipert, of Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis. "And many women liked the idea that these were long-term methods. They could get it and forget it."

A Mirena IUD, which contains the hormone progesterone, lasts five years; the copper ParaGuard IUD lasts 10 years and the Nexplanon (formerly Implanon) implant, which contains progesterone, lasts three.

Nelson, a hairdresser, said she never felt secure with pills and hormone shots. "I'm not really good at remembering to take a pill at the same time every day."

She got her Mirena IUD more than a year ago and says she's happy to have birth control off her to-do list for another four years.

One reason the methods may not be mentioned by doctors is that many have not been trained to insert and remove the devices.

"There are many providers who are not giving complete in-

formation about the full range of methods available," said Lawrence Finer, director of domestic research at Guttmacher.

Many older doctors also remember problems with IUDs, especially the Dalkon Shield, back in the 1970s, said David Hubacher, senior epidemiologist at Family Health International, Durham, N.C. That device was linked to pelvic infections and infertility.

Studies now suggest the increased risk of infection with IUDs is small and limited to the 20 days after insertion, said Tina Raine-Bennett, research director at the Women's Health Research Institute, Kaiser Permanente Northern California.

She led the ACOG committee that recommended the devices for teens and says that the old fear that IUDs would endanger the fertility of women who still want children was unfounded.

Hubacher said some women don't like the idea of an object in their bodies.

For the copper IUDs, side effects can include increased menstrual bleeding and cramps. The hormonal IUD often stops periods but also can cause irregular bleeding. The Implanon/Nexplanon implants also can cause irregular bleeding and may increase the risk of blood clots, especially in smokers.