Introduction and Overview

US women have a broad range of options for birth control and family planning, should they desire them, and face many choices regarding their reproductive health. It is critical that women be aware and well-informed of the most effective types of contraception – including which type is best suited to meet their unique needs at different stages of their lives.

In order to better understand how women think and feel about the care they receive related to family planning and selection of birth control, the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) conducted a survey of 1200 women between the ages of 18 and 45 from across the United States. The survey gauged women’s knowledge of available birth control methods, perceptions of the effectiveness of these methods in preventing pregnancy, and how women communicate with their family, friends, and health care providers about these topics.

The survey was distributed as part of ACNM’s ongoing Our Moment of Truth campaign, launched in 2012 to encourage women to actively participate in managing their health and learning more about the full range of options available to meet individual needs. These options include the woman-centered, evidence-based model of care provided by midwives throughout women’s lives, from the time of a woman’s first period, through family planning, pregnancy, birth, and menopause.

As part of the campaign’s national launch in 2012, an initial survey on women’s health found that while women said they were satisfied with their current health providers and services, they were not getting the services they truly wanted and were not having in-depth conversations with their health care providers that are needed to make informed choices about pregnancy and childbirth.

The 2013 survey expands on those findings to explore how women make decisions regarding family planning options and contraception methods, including knowledge of different types of birth control and the conversations they are having with their health providers.

The following report highlights key findings from the survey, implications for women and the health care they receive, and the opportunity for midwives to fill the gap in awareness and communication.

Survey Key Findings and Themes

Responses to the survey clearly demonstrate that women are not receiving adequate counsel and guidance in selecting birth control and family planning options, feel they have limited knowledge of the available options, and are not experiencing quality communication with their health care providers to determine the best birth control method to meet their unique needs.
should they desire it. Missing from the communication is consideration of issues such as age, overall health factors, and lifestyle.

Predominant themes from the survey responses and supporting data demonstrate that:

- **Women report they do not feel very knowledgeable about the different types of birth control available to them.**
  - Women feel most knowledgeable about abstinence, at 70%. Only a little more than half of the women said they were very knowledgeable about condoms (55%) and less than half of the women said they were very knowledgeable about birth control pills (49%), the withdrawal method (43%), and tubal ligation (28%).
  - Only 17% of women said they were very knowledgeable about birth control implants, and 21% of women said they were very knowledgeable about intrauterine devices (IUDs), both of which are recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as being 2 of the most effective forms of birth control, with fewer than 1 in 100 pregnancies occurring in women who use an implant or IUDs.\(^3\)

- **Many health providers are not properly informing women on how to correctly use the method prescribed to them.**
  - Forty percent of women surveyed said they did not receive in-depth counsel or information from their health provider on how to use the type of birth control they were prescribed.

- **Many women are not having positive experiences when discussing birth control and family planning with their health care provider.**
  - Although 64% of women shared they were presented with multiple birth control options by their health provider, 1 in 10 said they felt pressured to choose one type over another.
  - One in 10 women also stated they had questions they did not feel they were able to ask their health provider.
  - An additional 1 in 10 women said they felt their health provider made assumptions about them that led their provider to prescribe a certain type of birth control.
  - In open-ended responses collected through the survey, many women said they felt rushed or pressured to make a decision, and that they did not have adequate time to explore options beyond what was first recommended by their health provider.
  - Women also noted they faced barriers to having follow-up conversations with their providers about side effects they were experiencing or their desire to switch birth control methods, including long wait times to schedule an appointment or difficulty getting their provider on the phone.

- **Women have harmful misperceptions about which types of birth control are most effective.**
  - Birth control pills were ranked by 57% of respondents as the most effective form of birth control, followed by vasectomy (49%), tubal ligation (46%), and condoms (male or female, 43%). While vasectomy and tubal ligation are extremely effective in preventing pregnancy (fewer than 1% of women who had undergone tubal ligation and women having intercourse with partners who had undergone vasectomy experienced an unintended pregnancy, according to the CDC), 18-21% of women who relied on male or female condoms became pregnant.\(^5\)
o Women ranked intrauterine devices (IUDs) as the sixth-most effective form of birth control, with only 20% of respondents stating it is one of the most effective for preventing pregnancy.

o Only 13% of women ranked birth control implants as most effective, despite them being ranked as one of the most effective methods for preventing pregnancy according to the CDC.

• Many women are not using the forms of birth control that are most effective for preventing unplanned pregnancy.

o The top methods of birth control women reported using were birth control pills (27%), male or female condoms (20%), and withdrawal (13%).

o While birth control pills can be a convenient, highly effective method of preventing pregnancy, oftentimes women may forget to take their pill, creating an inconsistency in adherence that can lead to unplanned pregnancies.

o While condoms are highly effective at preventing sexually transmitted infections, the CDC reports that they have an 18-21% failure rate in preventing pregnancy.iii

o Only 2% of women are using birth control implants, and 6% of women are using IUDs, both of which are the most effective forms of birth control according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.iv

o Additionally, the reliance on the withdrawal method, which 13% of women cited as their current birth control method, underscores a lack of understanding around effective techniques to ensure prevention of unplanned pregnancy.

• Additional resources have found the following on the use of birth control:

o While oral contraceptive methods such as the pill are highly effective in preventing pregnancy – with only 9% of women taking it experiencing unintended pregnancy – oral contraception may not be the most convenient form of birth control for women at every stage of their lives.v

o Women may forget to take a pill, creating an inconsistency in adherence that can lead to unplanned pregnancies. In fact, a 2010 study published in the Journal of Women’s Health found that 30% of women report missing one or more pills per month, and approximately half of new oral contraceptive users will discontinue use within the first year.vi

o The same study reports that more than one million unintended pregnancies in the United States are believed to result from misuse, discontinuation, or lack of adherence to proper use of birth control pills.vii

o The ACNM study highlights that although birth control pills are perceived to be the most effective form of contraception, CDC findings show they are neither the most effective nor are they the most convenient for many women, according to the Journal of Women’s Health findings.

o Birth control methods such as IUDs and implants are more effective at preventing pregnancy, and do not require women to take a daily pill, increasing adherence and proper utilization of these forms of contraception.viii

• Midwives are uniquely positioned to address the knowledge and service gap in birth control and family planning for US women.

o Thirty-seven percent of women sought counsel from a health provider when they decided to switch or discontinue use of their birth control method, and an additional 22% discussed this decision with their partner. Nineteen percent did not consult anyone.

o Only 26% of women surveyed knew that CNMs and CMs offer family planning and contraceptive services, despite this being a core practice area for CNMs and
CMs. Fewer than 5% of women consulted a certified nurse-midwife (CNM) or certified midwife (CM) when making this decision.

- While there are a full range of health care providers who offer birth control and family planning services, midwives are a particularly underutilized resource. Midwives serve as partners in their clients’ health care, and provide personalized services tailored to each woman’s unique needs—a style of care that is especially suited to assist women in making important birth control and family planning decisions.
- Fifty-six percent of women consulted an obstetrician-gynecologist to make a decision on which type of birth control was best for them, while 26% saw a family practice physician, and 13% visited a nurse practitioner.
- Nearly one-third of women who had consulted a health provider around a decision to switch birth control methods went to an obstetrician-gynecologist to have this discussion.
- When asked which health providers they knew offered family planning and birth control services, 78% cited obstetrician-gynecologist, followed by family practice physicians (66%) and nurse practitioners (46%).
- Fifty-two percent of women receive their annual health check-up (including pelvic exam, breast exam, pap test, sexually transmitted infection screening, and birth control prescriptions) from obstetrician-gynecologists, followed by family practice physicians (19%), and nurse practitioners (8%).
  - Only 2% of women went to a CNM or CM for their annual well woman’s health check-up.

- **The data on birth control and family planning are timely and particularly useful as providers and women learn more about the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA).**
  - The ACA improves coverage and expands services for women in the area of sexual and reproductive health.
  - More women will have access to these services.
  - Because midwives are well-trained and skilled at providing these services, ACA implementation is a new opportunity for more women to seek midwife-led care.

- **Women make decisions on which provider they see largely based on insurance coverage, as well as through conversations with friends and family.**
  - Nearly 30% of women chose their current health provider based on who was available to them through or covered by their health insurance plan.
  - Twenty-three percent of women made the decision to see their current provider based on a recommendation from a family member.
  - More than 12% of women chose their provider because he or she is affiliated with a preferred treatment setting, such as a hospital, birth center, or provider office.

**Implications for Women’s Health Care in the United States**

A study released in 2012 by the CDC found that more than one-third of pregnancies and births occurring in the United States between 2006 and 2012 were unplanned. Unplanned pregnancy does not necessarily imply an unwanted pregnancy, but it means that the individual woman was not actively planning to have a pregnancy at that time. Of these women who experienced an unplanned pregnancy, 60% were not using contraception, and 26% of those women stated they were not on birth control because they felt they could not get pregnant.
When a woman becomes pregnant without planning to do so, both she and her baby are potentially at increased risk for complications. When pregnancy is unplanned, women may not be in optimal health for childbirth, and may not make important decisions or take necessary actions soon enough, including seeking prenatal care for their baby, maintaining healthy weight and eating habits, being physically active, abstaining from tobacco, drug, and alcohol use, and other important considerations women should take into account during pregnancy.

By ensuring that women are receiving the best information possible to assist in selecting the optimal type of birth control, if they desire one, for their lifestyle and health, unintended pregnancies and their sometimes harmful complications may be prevented.

Opportunities for Midwives to Fill the Gap

A clear finding of the survey was that women were largely unaware that midwives provide family planning and contraceptive services, including the ability of certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and certified midwives (CMs) to prescribe all types of birth control. In fact, only 26% of respondents were aware that midwives offer these services and are a resource in this area. Additionally, fewer than 5% of respondents stated they had consulted a CNM or CM to decide on the type of birth control they were currently using or had used in the past, while more than half had consulted an obstetrician-gynecologist and 26% had discussed their decisions with a family practice physician.

Midwives – specialized women’s health care professionals who provide a broad range of services to women at all stages of their lives – are uniquely positioned to help address this significant and potentially harmful gap in family planning and birth control services for women in the United States.

CNMs and CMs provide comprehensive care to women from the time of their first period through menopause, including counsel and guidance on birth control and the ability to prescribe contraception. Women in the United States have much to gain from being aware of CNMs and CMs as a trusted resource when they are making these important decisions.

Midwives serve as partners in their clients’ health care, and provide personalized services tailored to each woman’s unique needs. Although midwives are well-known for offering care to women during pregnancy and labor, it is important that women are aware of the many additional services they provide, including assistance in making important birth control and family planning decisions.

It is critical that women are made aware of midwives’ availability as a health resource as new provisions of the Affordable Care Act related to sexual and reproductive health are implemented and take effect – including mandates requiring that existing insurance plans cover a number of services that midwives commonly provide. The new legislation and its provisions will provide greater access to midwives as women’s health providers. As such, women must be made aware of all resources and services available to them to ensure the best possible care, and midwives can play a role in informing women on how ACA impacts them and the health services they receive.

Our Moment of Truth: 2013 Survey of Women’s Health Care Experiences and Perceptions Report Committee

The 2013 ACNM survey and Report on Family Planning & Birth Control were developed by a committee of midwifery experts, including ACNM staff members and practicing midwives, including:
- M. Christina Johnson, CNM, MS, Director, Professional Practice & Health Policy, ACNM
Survey Methodology
ACNM’s 2013 Survey on Women’s Health Care Experiences & Perceptions: Spotlight on Family Planning & Contraception was programmed and fielded through GMI-Lightspeed Research during August 2013. The online survey link was distributed to and completed by 1,224 women between the ages of 18 and 45, comprising a representative sample of U.S. demographics for this age group, including race, income level and geographic distribution.

About Our Moment of Truth™: A New Understanding of Midwifery Care
Our Moment of Truth™: A New Understanding of Midwifery Care presents midwifery as a solution for many women who are looking for more out of their care. Recognizing that many women are not receiving the care they desire, Our Moment of Truth™ challenges women to evaluate what they want from their health care experience and become aware of their full range of options. Our Moment of Truth™ offers women the information and tools they need to ask the right questions of their provider and have an important dialogue on critical health issues before moving forward with a care plan. Explore Our Moment of Truth™ tools and resources for finding desired health care at www.ourmomentoftruth.com.

About the American College of Nurse-Midwives
The American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) is the professional association that represents certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and certified midwives (CMs) in the United States. ACNM promotes excellence in midwifery education, clinical practice, and research. With roots dating to 1929, our members are primary care providers for women throughout the lifespan, with a special emphasis on pregnancy, childbirth, and gynecologic and reproductive health. ACNM provides research, administers and promotes continuing education programs, establishes clinical practice standards, and creates liaisons with state and federal agencies and members of Congress to increase the visibility and recognition of midwifery care. Visit www.midwife.org for more information.

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\[\text{References}\]


ii Ibid.

iii Ibid.

iv Ibid.

v Ibid.


vii Ibid.
