

Forbes: Could The Most Effective Birth Control Soon Become The Cheapest?

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The most effective reversible forms of birth control are mostly priced out of reach for millions of women who need it most—until now. An unusual partnership between a nonprofit pharmaceutical company and a traditional pharmaceutical distributor aims to increase access to IUDs (intrauterine devices) for U.S. servicewomen and in public clinics.

[Liletta](#), a hormonal IUD approved by the FDA in [April 2015](#), resulted from a joint venture between [Allergan AGN +1.81%](#) and Medicines360, a global nonprofit women's health pharmaceutical company whose primary funding comes from an anonymous donor's grant.

“The whole point of Liletta at \$50 is that public health clinics can have it available and stocked so that for women who are underinsured, uninsured or choosing not to use their insurance, the clinic can absorb the cost of providing these to those women,” Jessica Grossman, the CEO of Medicines360, told me. Yes, \$50—one fifth to one tenth the typical cost of an IUD.

IUDs are a type of long-acting reversible contraception, or LARCs. An IUD is a T-shaped contraceptive device that sits just above the cervix and prevents fertilization both through its physical existence and by releasing levonorgestrel, the same kind of progestin hormone found in many birth control pills.

“What makes LARC methods great is that women can have them placed and then they can forget about them—basically, they are a ‘no worry’ birth control method—safe, extremely effective and completely and quickly reversible when removed,” said Alison Edelman, MD, MPH, director of the Oregon Family Planning Fellowship and a professor of OB/GYN at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland.

Though more than 99% effective with a low risk of complications or harms, IUDs typically cost anywhere from \$300 to \$650, excluding the cost of insertion by a healthcare provider. They do last up to 5 or 10 years, which reduces the overall cost considerably, but it's still a hefty upfront price tag. IUDs are covered under most insurance plans, but some people still lack insurance while others, such as minors, may not want to use their insurance. Meanwhile, about half of all pregnancies are unplanned, so the need for effective contraception is clear.

“The ACA has changed the landscape of women being able to access contraception, but there are still certain groups that have difficulties accessing the health system,” Edelman said. She noted that many states' Medicaid programs won't cover contraception immediately after a woman gives birth, for example. “Not all primary care services are equipped or trained to provide these methods and thus it takes an extra step with a referral to receive a LARC,” she added. “These delays can place women who are sexually active at risk for pregnancy.”

When money is no object, however, research shows that [two thirds of women](#) opt for long-acting reversible contraceptives, or LARCs, [especially IUDs](#).

Other IUD manufacturers, such as [Bayer](#) , which produces Mirena and Skyla IUDs, also [have programs](#) for those who cannot afford their devices, but those programs require a person not to have Medicaid or private insurance, or for the private insurance not to cover IUDs. By contrast, nearly anyone, with or without insurance, can buy a Liletta for \$75 under the Liletta Savings Program, and any [public health clinics can purchase](#) Liletta for just \$50. That low price means clinics can sell Liletta to their patients inexpensively or absorb the cost to provide IUDs to their clients free of charge.

Liletta also has a specific program just for women in the armed forces that enables them to purchase the IUD for \$55 out of pocket. Approximately one third of military servicewoman are unable to get their preferred method of birth control while deployed, said Aimee Lenar, Vice President of Women’s Health Care at Allergan.

“We believe women shouldn’t have to think, *did I remember to take my pill or did I pack my condoms*, and an IUD is a method women can set and forget,” Lenar said. “In the military, men and women are serving our country and they should be focused on their job rather than worrying about their birth control method. After they’re deployed, you can imagine they have other things on their mind.”

Because Medicines360 is a global nonprofit, purchasing a Liletta IUD carries an additional twist: Medicines360 reinvests the royalties from sales into their programs in the U.S. and in the developing world. The company is about to launch Liletta in Kenya and is working on a partnership with Madagascar. “When you help to use Liletta, you’re helping women who are uninsured,” Grossman said.

Liletta was approved for use up to 3 years, though that may increase when ongoing trials conclude and Medicines360 resubmits an application to the FDA. Liletta devices are currently in clinical trials testing their safety and efficacy up to 7 years. And ideally, Liletta’s arrival is just the next of many. Edelman pointed out that most LARC methods are each currently produced by a single manufacturer, which gives that company a corner on the market.

“Creation of more choices or brands of devices that provide the same level of safety and efficacy allows women more choice and hopefully helps to decrease the cost of the methods, which then would hopefully make it more accessible to women,” Edelman said.

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