

Contraceptive Methods and their Impact on High-Risk Pregnancies in Low-Income Countries

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ABOUT THE STUDY

In many Low-Income Countries (LICs), maternal health remains a significant concern, particularly concerning high-risk pregnancies. High-risk pregnancies, characterized by factors such as age, underlying health conditions, multiple pregnancies or complications during previous pregnancies, contribute substantially to maternal morbidity and mortality. Contraceptive methods, when used effectively, can play an important role in preventing high-risk pregnancies by giving individuals the power to control the timing and number of children they have.

High-risk pregnancies in low-income countries

A high-risk pregnancy is one in which there are complications that threaten the health or life of the mother, the fetus or both. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines high-risk pregnancies as those in which the mother or child is at increased risk due to pre-existing health conditions, pregnancy complications, or socioeconomic factors.

Some common factors contributing to high-risk pregnancies in LICs include

Age: Adolescents (teenagers) and women over the age of 35 are at higher risk of complications.

Pre-existing health conditions: Chronic illnesses like hypertension, diabetes and heart disease can complicate pregnancy.

Multiple pregnancies: Women carrying twins or more face a higher risk of complications like preterm birth.

History of previous complications: Women who have experienced stillbirth, miscarriage or pregnancy-induced hypertension are at higher risk in subsequent pregnancies.

The consequences of high-risk pregnancies in low-income countries can be devastating, including increased maternal mortality, premature birth, birth defects and infant mortality.

Role of contraception in preventing high-risk pregnancies

Contraceptive methods enable individuals and couples to plan their pregnancies and space them in ways that promote better maternal and child health. By preventing unintended pregnancies, contraception reduces the likelihood of high-risk pregnancies, especially in populations with limited resources and access to healthcare.

The primary ways in which contraception helps prevent high-risk pregnancies in low-income countries include:

Spacing pregnancies: Proper spacing between pregnancies reduces the risk of complications such as preterm birth, low birth weight and maternal exhaustion. The WHO recommends waiting at least two years between pregnancies to allow the mother's body to recover fully.

Limiting the number of pregnancies: By preventing unintended pregnancies, contraception can help women avoid pregnancies in old age or at a young age, both of which are associated with higher risks.

Reducing unsafe abortion rates: Contraceptive methods also reduce the incidence of unsafe abortions, which are a major cause of maternal deaths in LICs.

Contraceptive methods in low-income countries

There are several contraceptive methods available to individuals in low-income countries, ranging from temporary methods to permanent solutions.

Long-Acting Reversible Contraceptives (LARCs): LARCs, such as Intrauterine Devices (IUDs) and contraceptive implants, are among the most effective methods for preventing high-risk pregnancies.

Intrauterine Devices (IUDs): IUDs are small devices placed inside the uterus to prevent pregnancy. They are highly effective,

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Received: 19-Nov-2024, Manuscript No. FMMSR-24-36651; **Editor assigned:** 22-Nov-2024, PreQC No. FMMSR-24-36651 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 09-Dec-2024, QC No. FMMSR-24-36651; **Revised:** 16-Dec-2024, Manuscript No. FMMSR-24-36651 (R); **Published:** 23-Dec-2024, DOI: 10.37532/2327-4972.24.13.203

Citation: Hiersch L (2024). Contraceptive Methods and their Impact on High-Risk Pregnancies in Low-Income Countries. J Fam Med Med Sci Res. 13:203.

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with a failure rate of less than 1%. Once inserted, IUDs can last between 5 to 12 years, depending on the type.

Contraceptive implants: Implants are small, flexible rods inserted under the skin of the arm, which release hormones to prevent pregnancy. They can last from 3 to 5 years and are also highly effective.

The main benefits of LARCs in preventing high-risk pregnancies in LICs include long-term protection, convenience and cost-effectiveness. They reduce the burden on healthcare systems since they do not require frequent visits to healthcare providers.

Oral contraceptives: Birth control pills are a popular and widely used method of contraception. They are effective at preventing pregnancy when taken consistently, but their effectiveness can be reduced if users forget to take them or if they experience side effects.

Barrier methods: Such as condoms, are one of the most accessible forms of contraception, especially in low-income countries. While they are less effective than LARCs, when used consistently and correctly, condoms can prevent pregnancy and reduce the risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Sterilization: It is a permanent form of contraception. Tubal ligation (for women) and vasectomy (for men) are the most common forms of sterilization. While sterilization is highly effective in preventing pregnancy, it is not easily reversible, making it a controversial option, particularly for women who may want to have children in the future.

Emergency contraception: Emergency contraception (EC) is a method of preventing pregnancy after unprotected sex or contraceptive failure. While EC is not meant to be used as a primary method of contraception, it provides a critical option for preventing unintended pregnancies, particularly in cases of sexual assault or contraceptive failure.

Impact of contraceptive use on high-risk pregnancies

Contraceptive use has a direct and positive impact on the reduction of high-risk pregnancies in low-income countries. When women can plan their pregnancies and space them adequately, they are less likely to experience complications such as preterm birth, low birth weight and maternal exhaustion.

Family planning also empowers women by providing them with control over their reproductive health. This leads to improved socioeconomic outcomes, including better access to education, employment and healthcare, which in turn benefits families and communities.

Contraceptive methods are needed in preventing high-risk pregnancies, particularly in low-income countries where maternal and child health challenges are most pronounced. By improving access to contraception and family planning services, low-income countries can reduce the burden of high-risk pregnancies and improve maternal and child health outcomes.