

Sadia (her name and some others in this article have been changed), 24, while preparing for her upcoming wedding was also worrying about something else—what form of birth control to use. She had been warned by her aunt against using oral contraceptive pills because of the side-effects—that she would gain weight, experience hot flashes. Sadia herself was particularly worried about the hormonal changes due to the pill. Ahead of her wedding, she chose instead to stock up on emergency pills.

She used the emergency pill twice. Sadia, who just completed her Master's studies, didn't visit a gynecologist until after her wedding (then too, for other reasons). She and her husband used condoms and she also had the emergency pill as backup. While at the gynecologist, on revealing that she had taken emergency contraception a few times, she was advised to take oral contraceptive pills as regular birth control. Her fears about side effects were brushed off—she was told pills are much improved now. "I was not informed of any long-acting methods or any non-hormonal contraceptive options," she states.

Gynecologists I spoke to say their patients prefer to go for short-acting methods of birth control—condoms, oral contraceptive pills and injections. Dr Jahanara Rahman, a gynecologist practicing at National Medical College, says that even though many modern methods are available now, her patients tend to go for the oral contraceptive pill. It's readily available, widely known, and relatively easy to use—you just need to remember to take it every day, at the same time. Forget to take it once and you are not protected against pregnancy unless you take it alongside a barrier method such as condoms.

According to Dr Rahman, as young women become more aware of options other than the pill, demand for injections, for one, is rising. "Patients nowadays are more aware and come to us with their method of choice, compared to earlier. But they still prefer the pill over any other method," says Dr Sharmin Hafeez, a gynecologist who runs a private practice in Paltan. For those who do come to learn their options, especially newly married women, she recommends the minipill (progestin-only birth control pill) over the combined oral contraceptive pill, as the latter presents more side effects.

Side effects include mood swings, nausea and headaches, which tend to go away after a few months. There are positive side effects too—it helps those who experience heavy or painful periods and many find that their skin clears up on using hormonal contraception. However, there is no evidence to support the common perception that the pill makes women gain weight.

Hesitant to use the daily pill, some such as Sadia are using emergency pills instead only as and when they need it. "I have observed that many young women take the emergency pill as their only form

of birth control. They feel it a burden to take a daily pill or any long-acting methods," says Dr Rahman. But they are relying on a method not meant to act as a regular form of birth control but, as its name suggests, is only meant to be used in the case of an emergency (such as if regular birth control fails or if they were made to have sex against their will).

Professor Dr Ferdous Mahal, head of the Gynaecology and Obstetrics

stated complaint about the method, forget to take the pill on time every day.

As she could not rely on the oral contraceptive pill, when she was sexually active she turned instead to the morning after pill, as it is commonly known. "It is easier to take one pill right afterwards than taking the [daily] pill regularly," says Tasneem. She was aware of it as a backup to prevent unintended pregnancy, stating however that she is not aware of the potential side effects and does not remember experiencing any of these.

Tasneem knows emergency pills are not a form of birth control, which is why she is now thinking of using a long-acting method. Sadia, almost a year into her

removed later, if necessary," says Dr Hafeez. But what is holding back young women getting started with birth control from accessing this option?

"Young women worry about whether they will have problems conceiving later on if they adopt such long-acting methods," says Dr Hafeez. "There are some side effects once the IUD is inserted—there is often heavy bleeding in the months after [copper IUD] or menstruation can stop altogether [hormonal IUD]." But not all women experience these side effects and any harm to the uterus is rare.

According to Professor Laila Arjumand Banu, president of the Obstetrical and Gynecological Society of Bangladesh, "Earlier, the IUD was quite popular in our country. But then untrained nurses and paramedics inserting it incorrectly led to infections and other complications," adding that they have properly trained doctors on

the benefits and insertion of IUDs. "These risks are remote possibilities and should not deter patients from going for IUDs. If doctors do it themselves, patients will gain more confidence in the procedure."

But the IUD remains unavailable for young women who are unmarried and/or childless. It has become a common practice among doctors here to reject patients requesting an

IUD if they haven't yet undergone childbirth. "It's more or less official protocol," says Dr Rahman. Dr Banu echoes this, stating, "We do not give IUDs to those who are childless. There is a risk of subclinical infection and the [fallopian] tube can close. This is a remote possibility but with potentially devastating consequences for those who have never had children before."

Until quite recently worldwide, IUDs were recommended only for women who have already had a baby. With doctors' refusal to perform the procedure and patient misconceptions about safety, IUDs are not an option for some and not in the radar of others as an option.

Instead, young women are overwhelmingly choosing short-acting methods. Short-acting methods can be almost as effective as long-acting methods, but only if correctly used.

Today, even an app has been dubbed a natural contraceptive—Natural Cycles, developed by a Swedish inventor, uses body temperature to help users know how to prevent (or plan) pregnancy. More commonly, period-tracker apps such as Clue and Flo can help young women understand their natural cycles better. An alarm on your phone can remind you to take your daily pill or when your next injection is.

But use of long-acting methods are slowly increasing, says Dr Banu. Modern day contraception is such that young women's options should not be limited to the daily pill and they should not have to resort to taking emergency pills as a form of birth control. ■

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The Korean War began on June 25, 1950 and is "technically" still ongoing in the absence of a validated peace treaty—although, the fighting was ended with the signing of an armistice by North Korea, China and the US (South Korea was not a signatory) on July 27, 1953.

This is how General Douglas MacArthur described it to the US Congress back in 1951: "The war in Korea... almost destroyed that nation of 20 million people. I have never seen such devastation. I have seen, I guess, as much blood and disaster as any living man, and it just curled my stomach, the last time I was there." And this is what Curtis LeMay, who went on to head the US Strategic Air Command, wrote: "We burned down just about every city in North Korea and South Korea *both*...we killed off over a million civilian Koreans and drove several millions from their homes, with the inevitable additional tragedies bound to ensue."

With such calamities engraved into the history of the two Koreas and the lives and memories of all Koreans, it was always going to take some exceptional courage, among other things, to reduce the tension on the Korean Peninsula that for so long threatened a much larger, perhaps, nuclear war even. And that is what it took over the last few months of negotiations, which ultimately culminated in a North Korean leader walking across the border separating North from South for the first time since the war in the early 1950s.

Although stakeholders from all sides have expressed caution when asked about long-term peace, the massive turnaround concerning the situation on the Korean Peninsula is extremely encouraging for a world that desperately wants peace to prevail, having witnessed one war after another. But what has surprised many is that till January this year (and even beyond that to some extent), US officials and think-tank analysts were saying that since Kim Jong-Un's main purpose for acquiring nuclear missiles was to get the US to withdraw its troops from the Korean Peninsula, and to force a reunification with the South under its own terms, negotiations were bound to fail.

After months of tough public exchanges with his US counterpart, however, Kim Jong-Un suddenly made an announcement on April 21 that he had suspended all nuclear, intermediate-range, and ICBM missile tests, was going to close his only nuclear-testing site in the near future and was seeking to "make positive contributions to the building of the world free from nuclear weapons." This turn of events was followed by the even more historic face-to-face meeting between the leaders of North and South Korea on April 27, where they signed the "Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula."

The declaration said that, "South and North Korea will actively cooperate to establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula." But even more importantly: "During this year that marks the 65th anniversary of the Armistice, South and North Korea [have] agreed to actively pursue trilateral



AFP North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in PHOTO: AFP

HOPE FOR PEACE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

ERESH OMAR JAMAL

meetings involving the two Koreas and the United States, or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the United States and China with a view to declaring an end to the war and establishing a permanent and solid peace regime"—which many did, and still are, dismissing as fantasy, perhaps because they see this shift to have happened too suddenly. But that should not have been the case had they followed recent events more closely and beyond the more popular topics of discussion in the media. Let me explain.

Last week, the White House revealed the stunning news that the then CIA director Mike Pompeo had flown to North Korea over the Easter weekend and met face-to-face with Kim Jong-Un. This was key. This meeting was the result of a series of bilateral meetings between

North and South Korea's officials, which really should have given it away.

The National Intelligence Service (NIS) of South Korea is known for its extremely close and extensive ties with the CIA. Prior to, and during the course of the Winter Olympics, several key bilateral meetings were held between national security and intelligence officials of North and South Korea, as mentioned—led by South Korean President Moon Jae-in's National Security Adviser Chung Eui-yong on the South Korean side. The reason why NIS' close ties with the CIA and Chung Eui-yong's involvement are so important to mention is because such high level bilateral meetings would not have been agreed to by South Korea, without prior consultation with (and either encouragement or approval of) the US.

And since it was these meetings that later set the stage for Pompeo's secretive North Korean visit, all indications suggest that these meetings were received

quite positively by both sides. So, while the two sides postured for over months (which the media was busy covering), negotiations were not only ongoing, but they seem to have progressed relatively well—as evidenced more clearly now by the recent face-to-face meeting between the two Korean leaders.

Not only that, during US President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's joint press conference earlier this week, one reporter asked whether Trump had already spoken to Kim Jong-Un directly, to which he replied, "I'm not going to comment on that," effectively saying, "yes", he did. While all these are very good signs for the future of Korea and the rest of the world, let us not forget one very important thing.

That, which journalist Stephen Lendman, like many others, had pointed out when he wrote, "Neocon hardliners infesting Washington may" still look to "undermine" the peace process, which is why peace is, even now, far from being achieved. Although true, as the "war party" in Washington has been a constant problem for any deal towards peace that the US has been involved in over the past decade (if not longer), having witnessed so many unprecedented gestures from all sides that they want peace, should we, at least, not be a little more hopeful to the prospect of long lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula this time?

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OD-ING ON CONTRACEPTIVE PILLS

MALIHA KHAN

Department at International Medical College Hospital in Tongi, remarks on this practice, "I would not recommend using only emergency contraceptive pills as a form of birth control. It has lots of side effects, much more so than the daily pill." Dr Hafeez agrees, "It's not for regular use. I would advise anyone taking emergency pills to not use these any more than twice a month."

These side effects, though not long-term or serious, can include headaches, nausea and vomiting, unexpected or heavy menstruation. The emergency pills ideally taken as soon as possible after unprotected sex, it becomes less effective the longer you wait to take it. It can be effective for up to five days after, though the exact effectiveness is difficult to measure.

Tasneem, a 27-year-old professional working in development, has also used the emergency pill on occasion, up to three times last year. She first started using birth control years ago, being prescribed oral contraceptive pills for heavy menstruation. But, Tasneem found that she would get depressed and, an oft-

marriage, says she will soon adopt such a method too. "We encourage long-term methods as they are more effective at preventing pregnancy and are less hassle than taking a pill every day or an injection every few months," says Rahman.

Thinking long-term

Long-acting reversible contraception such as implants and IUDs (intrauterine device, also known as the contraceptive coil) are more effective at preventing unintended pregnancy but are not as popular as the pill. The copper IUD, a small device placed in the uterus and can last up to 12 years, in particular is touted as the most effective method of birth control out there. It can be taken out at any time and you don't need to think about it once it's been fitted. "This is commonly used by women who have already conceived and don't want any more children for now. They can have it