

Birth control pills

Oral contraceptive pills are an extremely effective form of birth control. They work primarily by inhibiting the ovaries from releasing eggs (inhibiting ovulation). The cervix (the opening to the uterus) also produces thicker mucous so that it is more difficult for sperm to travel. The pills may also act on the endometrium (the lining of the uterus) to make it harder for the egg to implant (attach).

Benefits of the pill:

- Very effective. If used perfectly, only 1/1000 women will become pregnant within a year.
- Safe for most women. Oral contraceptive pills are one of the most extensively studied medications available.
- May improve acne
- May decrease menstrual cramps and pain
- Menstrual periods may become shorter and lighter
- Decreased risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer
- Decreased rate of benign breast disease
- OCPs may prevent ovarian cysts and rheumatoid arthritis
- May help preserve bone mineral density

Disadvantages of the pill:

- Does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, herpes, warts, gonorrhea, and chlamydia
- Must be taken each and every day in order to work properly
- May cause nausea and vomiting
- Some women may have spotting in between menstrual cycles
- May cause headaches
- Increases risk of blood clots

OCPs are not recommended for women who have the following conditions:

- History of blood clots
- Active liver disease
- History of breast cancer
- Heavy tobacco use
- History of stroke or coronary artery disease
- High blood pressure greater than 160/100

Minor side effects (usually go away after 2-4 cycles of the pill):

- Nausea and vomiting (taking the pill with food or at bedtime may help reduce nausea)
- Spotting between periods
- Breast swelling and tenderness
- Headaches
- Mood changes

Serious side effects:

- Abdominal pain (severe)
- Chest pain
- Headache (severe)
- Eye problems, vision changes
- Severe localized leg pain (calf or thigh)

These can be symptoms of a blood clot. If you experience any of these, CALL YOUR DOCTOR IMMEDIATELY!!!

Pill interactions:

Some medications interfere with how the birth control pills work. If you take any of these, let your doctor know.

- Anti-seizure medications (phenytoin, phenobarbital, tegretol)
- Griseofulvin
- Rifampin
- Some antibiotics; if you take an antibiotic while on the birth control pill, it may make the pill less effective for that cycle. You should alert your doctor, and use a back-up method against getting pregnant (e.g. a condom) for the rest of that pill pack.

How to take the pill:

Oral contraceptive pills are very easy to take. They usually come in packages of 28 pills. You take one pill each day, about the same time each day. You may want to associate the pill with something that you do on a daily basis (i.e. brushing your teeth; washing your face at night; waking up) in order to help you to remember to take them each day.

There are many ways to start the pills. Here are the two most popular methods:

1) Start on the Sunday after your period starts. If your period starts on Sunday, take the first pill that same day. This will give you bleeding during the week when you get your period in the future.

2) Start on the first day of your menstrual period, regardless of what day of the week it is. This generally gives you bleeding on the weekend when you get your period in the future.

All combination oral contraceptive pill packs contain 21 days of hormone-containing pills, and 7 days of sugar pills (or placebo). The week during the sugar pill days is when you will have your period. As soon as you finish one pack, begin the next one immediately.

What happens if you forget to take a pill or two?

Missing hormone pills cause two main problems. First, you may have some spotting or irregular bleeding. Second, it increases the risk of getting pregnant.

- If you miss ONE hormone pill: Take the missed pill and the current day's pill (2 pills total) as soon as you remember.
- If you miss TWO hormone pills: Take two pills as soon as you remember and two pills the next day. For example, if you missed Monday and Tuesday's pills, and now it's Wednesday. Take 2 pills on Wednesday, and 2 pills on Thursday, and then back to normal
- If you miss THREE pills, that's it. You will get your period. Throw away the current package of pills. You will need to begin a new package of pills, and start over.
- If you miss any sugar pills, don't worry. Just resume taking them as soon as you remember.

If you miss hormone pills during a pill pack, you need a back-up method of protection (a condom) during the remainder of the pill pack!

If you have had sexual intercourse during the time when you weren't fully protected, call your doctor right away. Ask about emergency contraception. This can protect you from pregnancy with the first 72 hours after sexual intercourse!