

EFFECTIVENESS

The birth control pill, or oral contraceptive pill, is an effective nonpermanent method of birth control. Oral contraceptive pills are approximately 99.6% effective in preventing pregnancy if they are taken correctly. However, birth control pills do not prevent or protect from sexually transmitted diseases. To reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, use a condom every time you have sexual intercourse.

HOW BIRTH CONTROL PILLS WORK

Oral contraceptive pills contain two synthetic female hormones, an estrogen and progesterone. These hormones help to prevent pregnancy by stopping ovulation, changing the lining of the uterus, and changing the cervical mucous.

BENEFITS

In addition to preventing pregnancy, there are numerous benefits from the use of oral contraceptive pills. These include a reduced incidence of benign ovarian cysts, ectopic pregnancy, pelvic inflammatory disease, anemia, endometrial and ovarian cancer. Oral contraceptive pills also are very effective in controlling periods. Periods are regular, shorter, lighter, and cramps are usually reduced. Certain oral contraceptive pills are used to improve acne. Finally, birth control pills do not decrease a woman's chance of getting pregnant once she has stopped them.

RISKS

Most side effects caused by the oral contraceptive pill are not serious; they may be annoying but they will not damage your health. These side effects are usually temporary and may disappear in the first three cycles. The most common side effects are mild nausea, spotting between periods, breast tenderness or enlargement, increased appetite, and weight gain. Mood changes, irritability, depression, and loss of interest in sex may occur; these may be due to the birth control pill, life stresses, or a combination of both. A few women may develop freckling of the skin or acne.

Potential serious complications of oral contraceptive pills include blood clots in the leg, lung, brain, and heart, rare liver tumors, high blood pressure, and gall bladder disease. Smoking increases the risk of cardiovascular complications. Please talk with your health care provider about stopping smoking.

The role of estrogen products, such as oral contraceptive pills, in the development of breast cancer is controversial. Current research tells us that the birth control pill does not increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. If you are concerned about your risk for developing breast cancer, please talk with your health care provider.

There is a possible risk of reduced effectiveness of oral contraceptive pills with the concurrent use of other medications such as antibiotics, sedatives, and anticonvulsants. If taking any of these medications, to be safe, you should use an additional backup method of birth control during the entire cycle of pills.

Women who have had blood clots anywhere in the body, cancer of the breast or uterus, or liver disease may not be able to use birth control pills. Women with heart or kidney disease, fibrous growths of the uterus, depression, diabetes, thyroid disease, migraine headaches, or epilepsy should discuss with their health care provider whether they may or may not be able to use oral contraceptive pills.

instructions for use

STARTING BIRTH CONTROL PILLS

Choose a backup method of birth control, such as condoms, to use for the first week you are taking the pill. You will be protected from pregnancy after you have taken the pill for **7 days**. Keep this backup method handy and use it in case you: run out of pills, forget to take your pill, discontinue pill use, or need protection from sexually transmitted diseases (the condom is highly recommended).

There are several ways to start taking your pills. Use one of the following approaches:

- First approach: start your first pack of pills on the day your period begins.
- Second approach: start your first pack of pills on the fifth day after your period begins.
- Third approach: start your first pack on the first Sunday after your period begins. If your period starts on a Sunday, take your first pill that day.

Take one pill at about the same time each day until you finish the pack. Try to associate taking your pill with something you do about the same time every day, like brushing your teeth, eating a meal, or going to bed. Establishing a routine will make it easier for you to remember to take your pill. The pills work best if you take one at about the same time every day. Check your pack of pills each morning to make sure you took your pill the day before.

Most birth control pill packs are three weeks (21 days) of active hormonal pills followed by 7 days of inactive pills that do not contain any hormones. Sometime during the last 7 pills of your pack you should have a menstrual period. Always start a new pack of pills the next day after completing the last pack regardless of your menstrual flow. Your health care provider will advise you if your pill pack is different.

CONTINUING ON THE PILLS –WHAT IF.....

If you forget your pills for a day or two, follow the instructions below:

- When you miss one pill, it should be taken as soon as you remember it, even if it means taking two pills in one day. The remaining pills should be taken as usual, one per day. You are not protected from pregnancy until you have taken a pill for **7 consecutive days**. Use your backup method of contraception during these 7 days.
- When you miss two or more consecutive pills in the **FIRST** or **SECOND** week of your pack, take one pill as soon as you remember you forgot to take your pills. Take the rest of the pills in that pack in the normal sequence; this means you will have one or more pills left over when you finish the pack. You are not protected from pregnancy until you take a pill for **7 consecutive days**. Use your backup method of contraception during these seven days.
- When you miss two or more pills in a row during the **THIRD** week of pills, take one pill as soon you remember, then take the remaining active pills in the normal sequence (Thursday's pill on Thursday, etc). **DO NOT TAKE THE LAST 7 INACTIVE PILLS IN YOUR PACK**. Start a new pill pack after taking the last active/hormonal pill of the other pack. You are not protected from pregnancy until you have taken a pill for **7 consecutive days**. Use your backup method of contraception during these seven days. You may or may not have a menstrual flow.
- Missed birth control pills can cause an unplanned pregnancy especially if the pill-free period is extended beyond seven days. This means the most dangerous time is starting a pill pack late or missing pills in the third week of the pill pack. If this happens to you talk with your health care provider about Emergency Contraception. If you frequently forget to take pills, talk with your health care provider about other contraceptive options.

Birth control pills may cause side effects when you first start taking them. Most of these annoying symptoms go away after the second month of taking pills. We encourage you to remain on the pill for at least three cycles so that we can evaluate how you are adjusting. Some women experience slight nausea, which may be relieved by taking the pill with a meal or by taking the pill with a snack at bedtime. Breakthrough bleeding (spotting between periods) frequently occurs. Taking the pill at the same time every day and not missing pills will help. Exercise, a healthy diet, and a daily vitamin for women may also help relieve the symptoms. Sometimes, though, symptoms persist and your health care provider may be able to solve the problem by changing your pill. If you are not happy with the pills you are using, discuss this with your health care provider rather than giving up and stopping them. There are many kinds of pills and you may better tolerate one than another.

The most serious complication from the use of birth control pills is the development of blood clots. You need to learn these danger signs or "ACHES" and contact your health care provider if they happen to you.

- **A** severe abdominal pain
- **C** severe chest pain, cough, shortness of breath
- **H** severe headaches
- **E** severe eye problems, blurred vision, vision loss
- **S** severe leg pain, in calf or thigh

Cigarette smoking significantly increases your risk of serious cardiovascular problems if you also use birth control pills. You should stop smoking.

At times, and for some women, there may be no menstrual bleeding while using birth control pills. If you miss one menstrual period and have taken the pills exactly as directed, continue as usual with your next cycle. If you have not taken the pills correctly and miss a period you should be evaluated for pregnancy. If two consecutive menstrual periods are missed, you should be evaluated for pregnancy. It is not a health hazard to miss your menstrual period when you are on birth control pills.

If you see a healthcare provider for any reason, be sure to mention that you are on birth control pills. Some illnesses and medications do impact on birth control pill effectiveness. If taking antibiotics, to be absolutely safe, you should use your backup method of birth control with the remainder of that pill cycle.

For more information about your birth control pill read the pill packet insert.

Initially, you will need an appointment with your health care provider, in 3 months, for a refill of your pills. Then you will see your healthcare provider yearly for a pelvic exam, Pap smear, and pill refill. Always make an appointment well before you run out of pills so there is no scheduling difficulty and you have the pills when you need them.

Tufts University Health Service

