

PATIENT INFORMATION

ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES

WHAT IS THE BIRTH CONTROL PILL?

The combined oral contraceptive pill (OCP) is a safe and effective method of birth control for most women. It prevents ovulation in most women. Therefore, in addition to its contraceptive action it also eliminates mid-cycle pain which some women experience with ovulation. It also offers medical benefits such as decreased menstrual cramps and/or heavy bleeding, regulation of periods, and may result in an improvement of acne in some women. There is also significant protection against endometrial and ovarian cancer. However, no medication or birth control method is without the potential for side effects.

HOW DOES THE COMBINED ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE PILL WORK?

OCP's work on different parts of the body to produce make you not getting pregnant. The pill inhibits ovulation by suppressing the pituitary gland into thinking a woman is pregnant, therefore prevents release of the hormones that stimulate the ovary. The pill also changes the secretions within the uterus and cellular structure of the lining of the uterus (endometrium) so that the fertilized egg cannot implant itself. Finally, the pill creates a thick cervical mucus, thus hampering the transport of sperm.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE COMBINED ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE PILL?

OCP's are very effective when used correctly. If combined estrogen-progestin pills are used as directed, only about 1 in 1000 women is expected to become pregnant within the first year of pill use (0.1%). The treatment failure rates may be higher for during typical use as women may make mistakes when taking the pill.

ARE THERE SOME PRECAUTIONS OR CONTRAINDICATIONS REGARDING THE COMBINED ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE?

Women with any of the following should not take the combined pill:

- history of blood clots in the legs/lungs or stroke
- coronary artery or ischemic heart disease
- kidney failure
- liver cancer or acute stages of hepatitis
- personal history of breast cancer

Caution is exercised if combined oral contraceptives are used or considered in the following situations:

- a current smoker over 35 years of age (particularly 15 or more cigarettes a day)
- migraine headaches that start after initiation of oral contraceptives
- high blood pressure or high cholesterol

- diabetes
- elective major surgery or major surgery requiring immobilization planned in the next four weeks
- undiagnosed abnormal vaginal/uterine bleeding
- sickle cell disease
- active gallbladder disease or disease with jaundice
- women over 50
- breast feeding
- completion of term pregnancy within the past 21 days
- conditions such as mental retardation, psychiatric illness, alcoholism or chemical abuse or other conditions which make it difficult to take the medication correctly and consistently.

Remember, this is not a comprehensive list of possible conditions. Method of contraception should be discussed with a health care provider before a decision is made. Also progestin-only methods may be considered in some instances.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR SIDE EFFECTS OF THE PILL?

Often the most common side effect is mid cycle spotting (so-called "break through bleeding"). This is very common; if mild in the first month or two it will probably go away. If it doesn't your health care provider may want to change your pill. Other common symptoms include:

- breast tenderness
- a change in the amount and duration of your period (usually a smaller menses)
- nausea &/or vomiting
- changes in weight
- light brown spots on the face (melasma)
- migraine headache
- depression

HOW DO I TAKE THE COMBINED CONTRACEPTIVE PILL?

It is important to use a back-up method such as condoms and a vaginal spermicide for the month you are on the pill.

Most physicians recommend starting on the first Sunday after your period begins and this is often the way you will be instructed to begin your pill. Consult with your physician if you would like to begin on a different day.

Once you start your pills, take one pill a day at roughly the same time of day. Then, if you are using the 28-day package, begin a new pack immediately. Your period should begin about the second day of the last row of pills (or placebo pills). Keep taking those pills until they are gone (28 days) and begin the new pack the next day. Bleeding, if it is still present, should taper off and stop once you begin the new pack. Skip no days between packages.

Try to associate taking your pill with something else that is regular and routine so you don't forget. Check your pack of pills each morning to make sure you took your pill the day before.

WHAT IF I FORGET TO TAKE MY BIRTH CONTROL PILL OR I START MY PACK LATE?

For 30–35 µg ethinylestradiol pills (regular dose):

Situation 1: Missed 1 or 2 active (hormonal) pills or if you start pack 1 or 2 days late

- ◆ You should take an active (hormonal) pill as soon as possible*** and then continue taking pills daily, 1 each day.
- ◆ You does not need any additional contraceptive protection.

Situation 2: Missed 3 or more active (hormonal) pills or if you start a pack 3 or more days late

- ◆ You should take an active (hormonal) pill as soon as possible*** and then continue taking pills daily, 1 each day.
- ◆ You should also use condoms or abstain from sex until you have taken active (hormonal) pills for 7 days in a row.
- ◆ If you miss the pills in the third week, you should finish the active (hormonal) pills in her current pack and start a new pack the next day. You should not take the 7 inactive pills.
- ◆ If you miss the pills in the first week and had unprotected sex, you may wish to consider the use of emergency contraception.

Situation 3: If you miss any inactive (non-hormonal) pills:

- ◆ You should discard the missed inactive (non-hormonal) pill(s) and then continue taking pills daily, 1 each day.

For 20 µg or less ethinylestradiol pills (low dose):

- ◆ If you miss 1 active (hormonal) pill or starts a pack 1 day late, follow directions for Situation 1, above.
- ◆ If you miss 2 or more active (hormonal) pills or if you start a pack 2 or more days late, follow directions for Situation 2, above.

***If you miss more than 1 active (hormonal) pill, you can take the first missed pill and then either continue taking the rest of the missed pills or discard them to stay on schedule.

Depending on when you remember that you missed a pill(s), you may take 2 pills on the same day (one at the moment of remembering, and the other at the regular time) or even at the same time.

ARE THERE MEDICATIONS THAT WILL CHANGE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PILL OR BE CHANGED IN THEIR EFFECTIVENESS BY THE PILL?

Yes. The effectiveness of birth control pills may be slightly decreased by a number of drugs that change liver function or decrease the ability of the body to absorb the hormones in birth control pills. Anytime a prescription is being written, you should ask whether or not it will interfere, and use a back-up method if it might.

Specifically rifampin, phenytoin (Dilantin), carbamazepine (Tegretol), ampicillin or tetracycline might interfere with the pill. Use a back-up contraceptive if you are sexually active and taking birth control and any of these medications.

WHAT ABOUT IF I GET A LIGHTER PERIOD ON THE PILL?

A period may be so light that you may have only a brown smudge on a tampon or on underwear. If it is the normal time for the period, you have used the back-up method as recommended for the first month, and you have not missed pills, you can consider this a period.

WHAT IF I MISS A PERIOD?

If you do not have your period when you expect it, you may want to ask your health care provider or have a pregnancy test before you begin your new pack. However, some guidelines are: if you have not missed any pills and you used a back-up method if and when it was required, and you miss one period, without any signs of pregnancy, pregnancy is unlikely. You might consider starting a new pack of pills at the regular time. However, call your doctor if you are concerned.

If you forget one or more pills and miss a period, stop taking the pills and use another method of birth control. See your health care provider for an examination and sensitive pregnancy test as an over-the-counter pregnancy test may not be positive this early.)

If you miss two periods in a row, contact your health care provider for tests even if you missed no pills. Do not take pills, and be sure to use a back-up until you know what is happening.

WHAT IF I WANT TO BECOME PREGNANT?

Stop taking pills after a cycle. It is probably medically safe to get pregnant soon after you stop the pill.