

Birth Control Pill

What is it?

Birth control pills are a monthly series of pills usually packaged in units of 28 pills. The Health Center carries several types of “combination” pills. They all contain differing amounts of two types of synthetic hormones, similar to the body’s own estrogen and progesterone. The hormones in the pill thicken cervical mucus and prevent a woman’s ovaries from releasing an egg (ovulation). The pill has been used since early 1960s. It is very safe and has many health benefits. The pill is one of the most effective means of preventing pregnancy. The failure rate is between 1-5% per year.

How do I begin?

- Start taking them today or “quick start”
- Start them on the first day of menstrual bleeding or
- Start them on the first Sunday after your menstrual bleeding begins.

Take one pill at the same time each day until you finish the package. Usually the last 7 pills are placebos; for several days of these 7, light bleeding will occur. Begin a new package every 28 days. Continuous use pills are also available. These pills reduce the number of scheduled days of bleeding. Please ask your medical provider about continuous pills if you wish to limit or postpone your days of bleeding.

When should I take pills?

Take your pills at the same time each day. This will help you to remember to take your pills. Plan to take the pills with something else you do everyday, such as brushing your teeth, eating dinner, going to sleep, etc.

What if I forget to take the pill?

If you forget a pill, take it as soon as you realize it. Even if this means taking two pills in one day, you should take them as soon as possible. If you miss the first or last active pill of the pack, there is an increased risk that you may have ovulated, so be sure to use a second method of contraception for 7 days. If you miss 2 pills in a row, take 2 the day you remember and 2 the next day and use condoms for the next 7 days. You may want to consider emergency contraception. Call your clinician if you have any questions.

When do the pills become effective?

With your first cycle of pills, use a back up contraceptive method (such as condoms) or abstain from vaginal intercourse for the first 7 days of pill use. Certainly longer use is recommended if you have trouble remembering to take your pills on schedule. Be sure to read the pill package insert for detailed information about your pills.

Are there other times I need to use supplemental contraception?

Use condoms in addition to pills if:

- you want to decrease your risk of infection;
- you missed taking pills;
- you ran out or stopped the pills abruptly;
- you were late starting your new pills;
- you had severe vomiting or diarrhea;
- you have to take medications that lower the body’s ability to absorb contraceptive hormones. (Check with the clinician who prescribed the medication)

If you have had sexual intercourse that was unprotected, consider emergency contraception, which is available at the IUHC, M-F, 8:00 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. or over the counter at pharmacies.

Use condoms if you suspect you or your partner have a sexually transmitted infection.

What if I lose a pill?

If you lose a pill, call the third floor Women's Clinic (855-2202) to see about replacing a pill. In the meantime, you should take another pill of the same color. If that's not possible, you may take the next pill from your package, even if it's not the same color. However, 28 day pill packs have 7 placebo pills. Taking one of these as a replacement pill will not provide protection.

What can I expect my periods to be like?

Your periods will generally be very light, very short, and with less cramping. Cramps will be light-if you have any. A normal period while using the pill could be as little as one day of light bleeding or spotting. You may even skip an occasional period. If you are sure you have taken all your pills correctly, don't worry. If you skip two periods in a row, see a clinician. Do **NOT** stop your pills unless directed to do so.

What additional health benefits can pills provide?

In addition to its intended use-protection against unwanted pregnancy-"the pill" may be beneficial to your health in a number of ways. These positive health benefits range from protection against certain cancers to reduced incidence of various other diseases. Some of these benefits can have long-term impact even after pill use is stopped.

They may provide REDUCED RISK of:

- endometrial cancer
- ovarian cancer
- ovarian cysts
- benign (fibrocystic) breast disease
- pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)
- ectopic pregnancy
- iron deficiency anemia
- menstrual cycle irregularities
- menstrual cramps

Pills may also improve acne and enhance sexual enjoyment.

What are possible complications?

Birth control pills increase the risk of blood clots in veins and arteries. The risk of a blood clot is extremely small in young, healthy women. The highest risk is seen in older smokers. However, pregnancy confers an even greater risk of these problems. Clots in the veins can cause thrombophlebitis (mostly in the leg) and pulmonary embolism (a blood clot that travels to the lungs.) Clots in arteries cause heart attacks or strokes. Know the warning signs of these problems (see below) and get medical evaluation immediately.

Birth control pills may also cause elevated blood pressure, migraines, gall bladder problems and very rarely a benign liver tumor.

CALL YOUR PHYSICIAN/CLINICIAN IF YOU HAVE:

- A Abdominal pain (severe) that cannot be explained by food intake or stomach flu
- C Chest pain (severe or sudden) or shortness of breath
- H Unusual or suddenly severe headaches with dizziness or vomiting.
- E Eye problems (blurred vision, flashing lights or blindness)
- S Severe leg pain, one-sided weakness or numbness (calf or thigh)

We advise women to **quit smoking** if they want to use birth control pills.

Who shouldn't take pills?

Talk to your clinician if you've had a history of blood clots, heart attack or stroke, cancer of the breast, cervix or uterus, jaundice or if you are currently pregnant.

What about spotting or bleeding between periods?

Some degree of spotting or bleeding between periods is not uncommon and tends to disappear after the first few cycles. Unless it is very heavy you may continue your pills. If you are worried, call your clinician. Bleeding or spotting may also be due to missing pills or taking them at irregular times.

Possible Problems?

It is true the pill may produce minor discomforts among some women who use it, such as:

- nausea
- skin changes (either improvement or worsening of acne)
- change in amount of vaginal secretion
- temporary fluid retention
- emotional changes, depression or change in sexual drive; if depression occurs, consult a health care provider.
- breast tenderness/increase in size
- missed periods
- weight change with low dose pills is not expected

These changes are usually temporary, lasting from one to three months. You must have a blood pressure check three months after starting pills. At that time the decision will be made by you and your clinician to either continue the pills or change to a different type.

After a woman stops using the pill, there may be a delay of up to several months before she begins to have normal periods again. It is also recommended that a woman stop pills for one month before trying to become pregnant.

Remember...

Birth control pills **do not** protect against the transmission of sexually transmitted infections including HIV (AIDS). Use latex condoms for increased protection against the transmission of sexually transmitted infections including HIV (AIDS).