



Oral Contraceptive (Birth Control) Pills

Facts:

This information applies to birth control pills that are a combination of the two female hormones, estrogen and progesterone. Pills work primarily by stopping ovulation (the release of an egg). There are many brands of pills with varying doses; the standard ones have 21 days of hormones and 7 days of reminder pills. Newer versions include a skin patch used monthly and a pill using 3 or more straight months of hormones. They are all equally effective in preventing pregnancy. Side effects from one pill are likely to be improved by switching pills.

How well do they work?

Although pills are not perfect at preventing pregnancy, they are close to 100% effective if you take them every day on schedule. Taken in this way, only 1 woman in 1,000 becomes pregnant per year. In actual use, 3 out of 100 women will get pregnant each year on birth control pills. Pills do not protect you from AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. Use a condom to protect you and your partner from sexually transmitted diseases. Condom use will also lessen the chance of pregnancy.

When do I start my pills?

First, choose a back-up method of birth control (such as condoms or foam) to use with pills for the first 7 days, since the pills may not protect you from pregnancy during the first pill pack. Keep this method on hand in case you run out of pills, forget them for 2 or more days in a row or have a serious problem and stop taking them. Read the package insert for the brand of pills you have and be sure you understand all the information.

Start taking the pills by one of the following schedules:

- ❖ The first day of menstrual bleeding (Note-with this schedule, the pills are effective immediately)
- ❖ The first Sunday after your menstrual bleeding begins (use your back-up for the first 7 days). This schedule avoids getting your menstrual period on a weekend.

How do I take the Pills?

- ❖ Take 1 pill each day to use up the pack and then start a new pack. For most brands, the pills in the 4th week are reminder pills and contain no active hormones. If you prefer not to take them, wait a week and then start a new pack.
- ❖ You must find a way to remember your pills every day. Try to associate taking your pill with something else you do routinely at the same time of day, such as brushing teeth, going to bed, eating a meal. It doesn't matter what time of day you choose to take it as long as you're consistent. If you get nausea from the pill, you may want to take it at bedtime.
- ❖ Mark your calendar to remind yourself to start a new pack or even to mark off each day as the pill is taken.
- ❖ Check your pill pack each morning to be sure you took your pill the day before.
- ❖ Use your back-up method if you suspect your pills may not work as well (see below for reasons).
- ❖ Be sure to tell every health care provider that you are taking birth control pills.

What if I miss Pills?

Forgetting one of the reminder pills is not a concern. If you miss any of the 21 hormone pills do the following:

Less than 24 hours late: Take the missed pill right away. Take your next pill at the usual time.

24 hours late: Take both the missed pill and today's pill at the same time.

More than 24 hours late: Take the last pill you missed right away. Take the next pill on time. Throw out the other missed pills. Take the rest of the pack on schedule. If you were more than 24 hours late during the 3rd week of pills (pills 15-21), do not take the 4th week off. When you finish the 21 hormone pills, start a new pack. You may not have a period, but this is not harmful.



What are the other reasons the pill may not be effective?

- ❖ Late starting new pill pack
- ❖ Severe vomiting or diarrhea
- ❖ Other medicines that interfere with the pill-seizure meds, some antibiotics.

Whether amoxicillin, doxycycline, or tetracycline interacts is controversial. Use a back-up method of birth control if you have any concerns.

What are the common side effects?

- ❖ Nausea—Improves with taking the pill at bedtime or with food.
- ❖ Weight gain—usually minor, 2-5lbs. Most weight gain while on the pill is not from the pill.
- ❖ Menstrual changes—usually lighter periods (possibly even none), less cramping
- ❖ Breakthrough bleeding—spotting in between menstrual periods
- ❖ Breast tenderness
- ❖ Headaches
- ❖ High blood pressure
- ❖ Depression, moodiness, or changes in sex drive

What are the risks?

Birth control pills are considered very safe. However, the following can occur rarely:

- ❖ Blood Clots (legs, lungs)
- ❖ Stroke
- ❖ Heart Attack

All of these are more common in women who smoke. They are very rare in non-smokers.

Are there benefits?

Yes. Pills decrease the risk of ovarian and uterine cancer, fibroids, ovarian cysts, endometriosis, benign breast lumps, pelvic infections, anemia, acne, ectopic pregnancy; they cause lighter menstrual periods with less cramping.

The pill should not be taken by women who have:

- ❖ Continued to smoke cigarettes.
- ❖ A history of blood clots, heart attack or stroke.
- ❖ Severe headaches.
- ❖ Unexplained abnormal vaginal bleeding.
- ❖ Uncontrolled high blood pressure.
- ❖ Known or suspected pregnancy.
- ❖ Tumor or disease of the liver.
- ❖ Known or suspected tumor of the breast or uterus.

Call your doctor as an emergency if any of the following occur:

- ❖ Chest pain (severe, shortness of breath, sharp pain with breathing, cough)
- ❖ Severe leg pain (calf or thigh)
- ❖ Headache (severe and unusual), dizziness, weakness, numbness, especially if one-sided
- ❖ Abdominal pain (severe)
- ❖ Sudden vision loss, blurring or speech problems

Call during office hours if any of the following occur:

- ❖ New or enlarging breast lumps
- ❖ Depression
- ❖ Heavy or prolonged vaginal bleeding
- ❖ No period for two months in a row

For more information:

The National Institutes of Health
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/birthcontrol.html

The American Social Health Association
www.ashastd.org

