

## Birth Control Pill

### What Is It?

The birth control pill releases hormones into a woman's body that change the way the body works and prevents pregnancy. In this case, the hormones in the Pill control the ovaries and the uterus and prevent ovulation (the release of an egg by the ovaries). For the pill to work, you have to take it every day.

### How Does It Work?

Most birth control pills are "combination pills" containing a combination of the hormones estrogen and progesterone to prevent ovulation (the release of an egg during the monthly cycle). A woman cannot get pregnant if she doesn't ovulate because there is no egg to be fertilized. The Pill also works by thickening the mucus around the cervix, which makes it difficult for sperm to enter the uterus and reach any eggs that may have been released. The hormones in the Pill can also sometimes affect the lining of the uterus, making it difficult for an egg to attach to the wall of the uterus.

Most combination pills come in either a 21-day pack or a 28-day pack. One hormone pill is taken each day at about the same time for 21 days. Depending on your pack, you will either stop taking birth control pills for 7 days (as in the 21-day pack) or you will take a pill that contains no hormones for 7 days (the 28-day pack). A woman has her period when she stops taking the pills that contain hormones. Some women prefer the 28-day pack because it helps them stay in the habit of taking a pill every day.

There is also a type of combination pill that decreases the frequency of a woman's period by supplying a hormone pill for 12 weeks and then inactive pills for 7 days. This decreases the number of periods to one every 3 months instead of one every month.

Any type of birth control pill works best when it is taken every single day at the same time of day, regardless of whether a woman is going to have sex. This is *especially important* with progesterone-only pills.

For the first 7 days of taking the Pill, a woman should use an additional form of contraception, such as condoms, to prevent pregnancy. After 7 days, the Pill should work alone to prevent pregnancy. But continuing to use condoms will protect against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

If pills are skipped or forgotten, a woman is not protected against pregnancy and she will need a backup form of birth control, such as condoms. Or she will need to stop having sex for a while. **Do not** take a friend's or relative's pills.

## How Well Does It Work?

Over the course of 1 year, 5 to 8 out of 100 typical couples who rely on the Pill to prevent pregnancy will have an accidental pregnancy. The Pill is an effective form of birth control, but even missing 1 day increases the chance of getting pregnant.

In general, how well each type of birth control method works depends on a lot of things. These include whether a person has any health conditions or is taking any medications or herbal supplements that might interfere with its use. For example, antibiotics or an herb like St. John's wort can interfere with the effectiveness of the Pill. Typically we recommend backing up condoms while on antibiotics for at least 7 days after the course of antibiotic treatment.

## Protection Against STDs

The birth control pill **does not** protect against STDs. Couples having sex must always use condoms along with the Pill to protect against STDs.

## Who shouldn't take birth control?

Not all women are suited to hormonal forms of birth control. If any of the following conditions apply to you, you may not be able to use this type of contraceptives:

- Smoke
- You are, or suspect you are pregnant
- Are breastfeeding and/or are less than 6 weeks postpartum
- Have active liver disease or a history of liver tumors
- Have a history of blood clotting problems
- Have diabetes
- Have breast cancer, history of breast cancer or an abnormal growth in the breast

## Possible Side Effects

The birth control pill is a safe and effective method of birth control. Most young women who take the Pill have none to very few side effects. The side effects that some women have while on the Pill include:

- irregular menstrual bleeding
- nausea, weight gain, headaches, dizziness, and breast tenderness
- mood changes
- blood clots (rare in women under 35 who do not smoke)

Some of these side effects improve over the first 3 months on the Pill. When a woman has side effects, a doctor will sometimes prescribe a different brand of the Pill.

The Pill also has some side effects that most women are happy about. It usually makes periods much lighter, reduces cramps, and is often prescribed for women who have menstrual problems. Taking the Pill often improves acne, and some doctors prescribe it for this purpose. Birth control pills have also been found to protect against some forms of breast disease, anemia, ovarian cysts, and ovarian and endometrial cancers.

## Advantages

- Safe and 99% effective if used consistently and correctly
- Reversible, rapid fertility return
- Easy to discontinue use
- Pills do not interfere with intercourse

## Disadvantages

- Require daily use
- Incorrect use is common (easy to miss the pill)
- No protection against STIs/HIV

## Starting the pill

Start the first pack of pills within seven days of starting your menstrual cycle or at any other time your provider is reasonably sure that you are not pregnant. If you do not start your pills within seven days of starting your period, you will also need a back-up method of birth control for the first 7 days you actually take the pill. Condoms, foaming tablets or abstinence are all methods that can protect against pregnancy during the first week of use.

## Managing missed pills

- **If you miss one active pill**, take that pill as soon as you remember, then continue taking your pills as usual.

The active pills are the 21 (specify COLOR) pills that contain the birth control hormones. The inactive pills are the 7 (specify COLOR) pills that do not contain hormones. The 7 inactive pills, found only in 28-day packs, often contain iron for your blood. However, missing an inactive pill does not increase your risk of pregnancy.

- **If you miss two or more active pills, in a row:**
  - continue taking the remaining pills in the current pack, one each day, until the pack is empty.
  - use another, back-up method of contraception (eg, condoms) until you have taken active pills again for 7 days in a row. These may be from the next pack.

## How Do You Get Birth Control?

A doctor or a nurse practitioner must prescribe the Pill. He or she will do a complete physical exam, which may include a pelvic exam. The doctor or nurse will often prescribe 3 months' worth of pills and explain when to begin taking the Pill and what to do if pills are missed. The doctor or nurse will usually ask the woman to come back in 3 months to have her blood pressure checked and to see if she is having any problems.

If there are no problems and a woman wants to continue to use the Pill, the doctor or nurse will probably write another prescription for 6 to 12 months. After that, women who are having sex should get routine exams every 6 months to a year, or as recommended by a doctor.

## How Much Does It Cost?

The Pill usually costs between \$20 and \$50 a month, depending on the type. In addition, birth control pills and doctor visits are covered by many health insurance plans.

## Common myths about the birth control pill

Myth	Fact
If I take a pill after intercourse I won't get pregnant.	To be an effective contraceptive agent, the pill must be taken as directed. The synthetic hormones present in the pill inhibit ovulation by suppressing the secretion of luteinizing hormone and follicle stimulating hormone by the pituitary gland. Taking the pill irregularly fails to suppress these hormones.
All birth control pills are the same.	While many birth control pills are similar, there are many different formulations offering different doses, side effects and different benefits.
Taking the pill causes weight gain.	Most women do not gain weight on the pill. But if you do it is likely to be water retention, limited to about 2 pounds. However, some women find the pill increases their appetite, which in turn causes overeating and weight gain. The solution: Switch to a different birth control pill.
The pill causes cancer.	The pill is <i>not</i> a cancer-causing agent, but a cancer- <i>reducing</i> agent, with good science to show that with continued pill use there's a dramatic and continued reduction in the incidence of ovarian cancer, and even uterine cancer
A woman will not be able to get pregnant until she has stopped taking the pill for a long period of time.	The pill is out of a woman's system and she is able to get pregnant within 24 hours of when she stops taking it.
Women need to take a break from the pill.	There is no reason for women to stop taking the pill or any other birth control method unless they want to get pregnant, are switching methods, or are no longer having sex.

©2008, Student Care Center

Resources: Family Health International ([www.fhi.org](http://www.fhi.org)); Familydoctor.org