

Fact Sheet

Combined Birth Control Pills (the pill)

What are birth control pills?

Birth control pills use hormones to prevent pregnancy. Combination birth control pills contain two types of hormones, estrogen and progestin. To prevent pregnancy you must take one pill every day even on the days you do not have sex. After you finish all the pills in one pack you must start a next pack right away to continue to prevent pregnancy. This method of birth control is reversible, meaning once you stop taking the pills you can get pregnant.

How do birth control pills work?

Birth control pills work by preventing ovulation (the release of an egg from a woman's ovary). They also make the mucus in a woman's cervix (the opening to her uterus) thick so that sperm cannot pass into the uterus to reach the egg. Birth control pills also thin the lining of a woman's uterus so that an egg cannot attach and develop into a pregnancy.

How well do birth control pills work to prevent pregnancy?

Birth control pills work very well to prevent pregnancy if you take them the correct way all the time. If 100 women use birth control pills the right way for one year only one woman might get pregnant. If the same 100 women use birth control pills for one year but do not always take them the right way, about 9 women might get pregnant.

What do women like about birth control pills?

- The pill is a very effective method of birth control.
- This method of birth control is reversible (not permanent).
- Birth control pills are private (no one but you needs to know).
- You do not need to interrupt sex to use the pill.
- Birth control pills may reduce your risk of cancer of the ovaries and uterus.
- Some women may have less pain and bleeding with their periods.
- Taking the pill may reduce the symptoms some women have before their periods, like breast tenderness, mood changes, and stomach or back pain.
- The pill may improve acne.
- You can usually get pregnant soon after you stop taking the pill.

What do women not like about birth control pills?

- Birth control pills DO NOT protect you from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
- You must remember to take the pill every day at the same time.
- Birth control pills may cause changes in your periods like spotting between periods, lighter or heavier periods, or no periods at all.
- Birth control pills may interact with other medicines you take which may change how well the birth control pills or the other medicines work.

What are the possible side effects of taking birth control pills?

- Changes in your period
- Nausea and vomiting
- Headaches
- Breast pain or breast tenderness
- Larger breast size
- Less desire for sex

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- Changes in mood, nervousness, or depression
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in weight
- Bloating and constipation
- Changes in skin (acne, oiliness, darkening, rash)
- Changes in hair (hair loss or unwanted hair growth)
- More vaginal discharge
- Vaginal infections
- Changes in vision
- Problems with contact lenses

Sometimes birth control pills can cause very serious health problems like heart attack, stroke, blood clots, liver disease, or high blood pressure.

- ✓ DO NOT use birth control pills if you have any of the following:
 - Liver disease or liver tumor
 - History of blood clot, stroke, or heart attack
 - Diabetes for more than 20 years or diabetes with kidney or eye problems
 - Certain kinds of very bad headaches
 - Some types of heart disease
 - High blood pressure
 - Breast cancer
 - Some forms of Lupus
 - A certain type of organ transplant
 - An allergy to estrogen or progestin or the other ingredients in birth control pills
- ✓ DO NOT use birth control pills if it has been less than 21 days since you had a baby or
 - If you are pregnant or think you might be pregnant.
 - If you are 35 years old or older and smoke cigarettes.
- ✓ Talk with your health care provider about whether the pill is safe for you if you have:
 - Problems with your gallbladder
 - HIV, tuberculosis or a seizure disorder and use certain types of medications
 - If you are breastfeeding and less than one month post-partum

Call your health center right away if you have any of the following:

- Shortness of breath
- Pain in your chest
- Sudden changes in your vision
- Very heavy vaginal bleeding
- New pain in your leg
- Lower stomach pain
- New or worse headaches
- New or worse depression
- A new lump in your breast
- Missed 2 periods in a row or missed 1 period after not taking the pill correctly, or think you might be pregnant
- Sudden nausea, vomiting, dizziness, faintness, numbness, or weakness in the arms or legs

Contact your health care provider if you think you may have a sexually transmitted disease (STD), if you want to stop using birth control pills and start using another method, or if you are planning to have surgery.

- To decrease your risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), use a latex condom every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.
- Emergency contraception (EC) prevents pregnancy when used no later than 3-5 days after unprotected sex. If you need EC or want more information, call your health care provider, family planning counselor, or pharmacist.