

Student Health Centre

Oral Contraceptive Pill



Introduction

The combined oral contraceptive pill is usually just called the pill. It contains synthetic (artificial) versions of the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone, which women produce naturally in their ovaries. The Pill is usually taken to prevent pregnancy, but it can also be used to treat:

painful periods - heavy periods - premenstrual syndrome - endometriosis

How Effective is it?



When taken correctly, the pill is over 99% effective at preventing pregnancy. This means that less than 1 woman in every 100 will get pregnant in a year.

How the pill works

The pill prevents the ovaries from releasing an egg each month (ovulation). It also: thickens the mucus in the neck of the womb, so it is harder for sperm to penetrate the womb and reach an egg
thins the lining of the womb, so there is less chance of a fertilised egg implanting into the womb and being able to grow

Types of Combined Pill



Although there are many different brands of pill, there are two main types: 21-day pills (the most common type). Each pill has the same amount of hormone in it. One pill is taken each day for 21 days and then no pills are taken for the next seven days. Examples are Microgynon, Yasmin and Dianette.

Every Day (ED) pills. There are 21 active pills and 7 inactive (dummy) pills in a pack. The two types of pill look different. One pill is taken each day for 28 days with no break between packets of pills. Every Day pills need to be taken in the right order. Examples are Microgynon ED and Logynon ED.

Special considerations

Not everyone can use the combined oral contraceptive pill (the pill). You will need to talk to your doctor or nurse about your medical history.

Advantages & Disadvantages

Some advantages of the pill include:

- It does not interrupt sex.
- It usually makes your bleeds regular, lighter and less painful.
- It reduces your risk of cancer of the ovaries, womb and colon.
- It can reduce the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome.
- It can sometimes reduce acne.
- It may protect against pelvic inflammatory disease.
- It may reduce the risk of fibroids, ovarian cysts and non-cancerous breast disease.

Disadvantages

- There are some risks associated with using the combined contraceptive pill (the pill). However, these risks are not common. For most women, the benefits of the pill outweigh the risks.
- It can cause temporary side effects at first, such as headaches, nausea, breast tenderness, fluid retention and mood swings. If these do not go after a few months, it may help to change to a different pill.
 - It can increase your blood pressure.
 - It does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections.

Advantages & Disadvantages

- ☒ Breakthrough bleeding and spotting is common in the first few months of using the pill.
- ☒ It has been linked to an increased risk of some serious health conditions such as thrombosis (blood clots) and breast cancer

The risk of getting a blood clot is very small, but your doctor will check if you have certain risk factors that make you more vulnerable before prescribing the pill. The pill can be taken with caution if you have one of the risk factors below, but should not be taken if you have two or more risk factors.

Risk factors include:

- ☒ being over 35 years old
- ☒ being a smoker or having quit smoking in the last year
- ☒ being very overweight (the pill should not be taken if your BMI is over 40)
- ☒ having migraines (you should not take the pill if you have severe or regular migraine attacks, especially if you get aura or a warning sign before an attack)
- ☒ having high blood pressure
- ☒ having had a blood clot or stroke in the past
- ☒ having a close relative who had a blood clot when they were younger than 45
- ☒ being immobile for a long time, for example in a wheelchair or with a leg in plaster

There is no evidence that the pill causes women to gain weight.

Starting the first pack of pills

The combined oral contraceptive pill is usually started on the first day of your period (day one of your menstrual cycle). In this case, you will be protected from pregnancy straight away and will not need additional contraception. If you start the pill on any other day of your cycle, you will not be protected from pregnancy straight away and will need additional contraception until you have taken the pill for seven days.

After having a baby

If you have just had a baby and are not breastfeeding, the pill can be started on day 21 after the birth. You will be protected against pregnancy straight away. If you are breastfeeding a baby under six months old, taking the pill can reduce your flow of milk. It is recommended that you use a different method of contraception until you stop breastfeeding.

After a miscarriage or abortion

If you have had a miscarriage or abortion, the pill can be started up to seven days after this and you will be protected from pregnancy straight away. If started more than seven days after the miscarriage or abortion, use additional contraception until you have taken the pill for seven days.

How to take the pill

21-day pills

- ☒ Take your first pill from the packet marked with the correct day of the week.
- ☒ Continue to take a pill at the same time each day until the pack is finished.
- ☒ Stop taking pills for seven days (during these seven days you will get a bleed).
- ☒ Start your next pack of pills on the eighth day, whether you are still bleeding or not. This should be the same day of the week as when you took your first pill.

Every Day pills

- ☒ Take the first pill from the section of the packet marked 'start'. This will be an active pill.
- ☒ Continue to take a pill every day, in the correct order and preferably at the same time each day, until the pack is finished (28 days).
- ☒ During the seven days of taking the inactive pills, you will get a bleed.
- ☒ Start your next pack of pills after you have finished the last, whether you are still bleeding or not.

Taking pill packs back to back

For 21 day combined pills, it is normally fine to start a new pack of pills straight after your last one, for example if you want to delay your period for a holiday. However, avoid taking more than two packs together unless advised to by your GP. This is because the womb lining continues to build up and you may have breakthrough bleeding as it sheds slightly. Also, some women find they feel very bloated if they run several packs of the pill together.