

Birth Control Pills

(Combined Oral Contraceptives)

Birth control pills contain two hormones, estrogen and progestin. They work by stopping ovulation (release of an egg) and by making the lining of the uterus (womb) thinner. For every 100 women who use birth control pills exactly as instructed, only 1 will become pregnant in one year.

What are the advantages of the pill?

- Decrease the risk of cancer of the ovaries
- Decrease the risk of cancer of the lining of the uterus (endometrial cancers)
- Decrease menstrual blood loss (lighter periods)
- Decrease menstrual cramps and pain
- May improve acne
- Highly effective in preventing pregnancy
- May prevent tubal pregnancies and pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)

What are the disadvantages of the pill?

- Do not provide protection against sexually transmits including HIV/AIDS
- May increase the risk of heart attack, strokes, and blood clots (especially in women who smoke and / or are over the age of 40)..
- May cause mood changes, nausea, irregular spotting, breast tenderness, and appetite changes (particularly in the first few months on the pill).
- Requires a prescription.
- Possible increase in the frequency or severity of headaches in migraine sufferers.
- Certain medications interfere with the birth control pill's protection against pregnancy (examples include Rifampin for tuberculosis, Dilantin and Tegretol for seizures, and some antibiotics).
- Possible liver tumor (very rare).

Are birth control pills safe?

Birth control pills are safe for most women. You should not take birth control pills if you have certain medical problems such as liver disease, cancer, a history of a heart attack, blood clots, or stroke. Women who smoke and are over the age of 35 should not take birth control pills. Women of all ages who take birth control pills should not smoke.

How do I take my birth control pills?

Most women use the Sunday start method. This method decreases the chance of the menstrual period beginning Sunday after the menstrual period begins. Regardless of the day of the week your period starts, the first birth control pill is

taken on Sunday. Follow your health care provider's advice about beginning pills if it differs from the Sunday start method.

Do I have to use condoms too?

The use of condoms is highly recommended. If used consistently, condoms help provide protection against sexually transmitted infections including HPV and HIV/AIDS. Birth control pills do not provide protection against these infections.

Also if you miss a pill, take certain medications, have vomiting or diarrhea, the birth control pill may not be as effective in prevention pregnancy so you will need to use condoms as a "backup" for the rest of the pill package.

If you ever experience any of the following danger signs while taking the birth control pill, contact your health care provider at once or go to the emergency room:

Abdominal pain (severe)

Chest pain (severe), shortness of breath

Headaches (severe), dizziness, weakness, or numbness

Eye problems (loss or blurring of vision), speech problems

Severe leg pain in the calf or thigh

What if I decide I want to have a baby?

See your health care provider for preconception counseling before stopping your birth control pills and begin taking folic acid 400mg per day to help in the prevention of certain birth defects of the spine and brain. Folic acid can be found as a single supplement or in a multi-vitamin. Women should have a minimum of two or three regular periods after stopping the birth control pill before trying to get pregnant. This may take up to six months. During this time, foam and condoms are a good birth control method to use. It is also very important not to smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs not prescribed by your health care provider, either prior to or during a pregnancy.

All women of child-bearing age should take a multi-vitamin that contains folic acid regardless of her plans for a pregnancy. Women should do a monthly self-breast examination and have a yearly examination done by a nurse practitioner or physician that includes a clinical breast examination and pap smear. Your health care provider can teach you how to do the self-breast examination. It's a lifesaver!