

# Birth Control Pills (Oral Contraceptives)

When taken as prescribed, the birth control pill (also called “the pill” or oral contraceptives) is a safe and effective method of contraception for most women. Birth control pills contain estrogen and progesterone. These two hormones, which are naturally produced by your body, are always present in your system in constantly changing levels. The major mechanism of birth control pills is to control the level of hormones, thereby preventing ovulation. Without ovulation, pregnancy cannot occur.

## EFFECTIVENESS

When used correctly and consistently, birth control pills are 99.5% effective.

## ADVANTAGES

- High rate of effectiveness
- Lighter, more regular menstrual periods
- Decreased premenstrual problems
- Decreased menstrual cramping with shorter, lighter, and more regular periods
- No interruption at the time of intercourse
- Offers some protection against endometrial and ovarian cancer

## DISADVANTAGES

- You must remember to take pill every day.
- There are some minor side effect that normally disappear within 3 months
- There are some major side effects; however, they are *extremely rare* in non-smokers and those under age 40.
- The pill does not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Although the connection between oral contraceptives and cancer of the breast or cervix is still being studied, there appears to be little, if any, increased risk for most women on low dose birth control pills. While you are taking birth control pills, you may notice some changes in your system.

## MINOR SIDE EFFECTS

- Nausea
- Breast tenderness
- Bloating
- Greater susceptibility to vaginal infections
- Possible weight gain

These side effects are now minimal and usually disappear within 3 months. Taking birth control pills with food will minimize nausea.

- Breakthrough bleeding (irregular bleeding)

The problem generally corrects itself in a couple of cycles. Breakthrough bleeding is not a sign of ineffective contraception and is of no serious significance if you have taken your pills correctly.

Minor side effects tend to diminish after a cycle or two. Contact your health care provider if these minor side effects continue for more than two cycles of pill use or if you have concerns about using the pill. Some of the side effects may be corrected by changing your pill prescription.

## MAJOR SIDE EFFECTS

For young, healthy women the likelihood of experiencing a serious problem associated with oral contraceptive use is rare. The most serious side effect associated with oral contraceptive use is thrombo embolism (blood clots in the legs, lungs, or brain). This risk is greater for women over forty years old and women who are overweight, smoke cigarettes, or have a very high cholesterol level.

*If you should experience any of the following symptoms*, contact your UHS health care provider at 275-2662 as soon as possible:

- Severe pain in the abdomen.
- Chest pain or shortness of breath.
- A sudden and/or severe headache.
- Persistent leg pain in the calf or thigh.
- Blurred vision or a sudden partial or full loss of vision.

## TAKING BIRTH CONTROL PILLS

Birth control pills are most effective if you take them at about the same time each day. Taking birth control pills the same time each day assures the maintenance of a therapeutic level of the hormone in your system while you are on the pill. You should swallow one pill a day until you finish the pill package. If you are using a "21 day" pill pack, do not take any pill for 7 days after you finish the pill package. On the 8th day after you finish the pack, take the first pill of your next pill pack. If you are using a "28 day" pill pack, take the first pill of your next pack the day after you take your last pill from your first pill package.

## BACKUP METHOD

There are a few times when you should use a back up method of birth control such as foam and a condom because your pills may not be fully effective. A fact sheet about condoms is available on the UHS web site.

*The times when you should use a back up method include:*

- During the first seven days of your first pack of pills.
- If you are taking certain other prescription medications.
- If you forget to take your pills (See “Missed Pills” on the following page.)
- If you are ill and experience vomiting or diarrhea in which case you may not receive the full effectiveness of the pill.
- If you stop taking your pills for any reason and remain sexually active.

If you begin your pills correctly and remember to take a pill daily, your protection should be continuous while you are on birth control pills.

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

### Medications:

Birth control pills are considered medications and may affect or be affected by other medications. Certain medications may decrease the effectiveness of the birth control pills. Please consult with your provider if you change medications or start a new medication. A back-up method such as condoms should be used while you are taking an antibiotic. Also, birth control pills may either increase or decrease the effectiveness of other medications. Because of these possible interactions, you should always inform your primary care provider of all medications you are taking including the fact that you are on birth control pills.

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## **Sexually Transmitted Infections:**

While birth control pills may be one of the best ways of preventing pregnancy, they do not protect against sexually transmitted infections. The combination of condoms and birth control pills provides the best protection against both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. As part of our efforts to prevent sexually transmitted infections, patients are given condoms when they purchase birth control pills at UHS.

## **Missed Pills:**

In order to avoid forgetting to take a pill, take each one along with some other regular activity such as bedtime or the same meal each day.

***If you miss one pill:*** Take it as soon as you remember it and take your next pill at the regular time, even if that means taking two pills during one day. Beginning the next day, resume taking your pills, one per day, until you have taken all of the pills in your pack. If just one pill is missed but taken within 24 hours, the chance of pregnancy is very small; however, a back up method of birth control can be used for the next seven days.

***If you miss two pills in a row:*** We recommend that you: 1) Take two pills as soon as you remember them or have them at hand. 2) Take two pills the next day. 3) Continue taking the rest of the pills in your pack as usual. 4. Use your back up method of birth control for the next seven days.

***If you miss three or more pills:*** We recommend that you: 1) Do not take any more pills from your current pack. 2) Begin using your back up method of birth control immediately. 3) As soon as possible, check with your health care provider about your chances of pregnancy and for instructions on beginning a new pill pack and the schedule for taking them. Chances are that if you miss three or more pills, you will either already be bleeding or you will begin your period soon.

## **Missed Periods:**

While on the pill, some women may still occasionally miss a menstrual period. If you have not missed any pills in your pack, you may begin your new package of pills at the regularly scheduled time. If you have missed any pills, or if you are worried about pregnancy, please call your UHS health care provider to discuss your missed period. If you miss two periods in a row, you should contact your health care provider.

## **PURCHASING BIRTH CONTROL PILLS**

Birth control pills are available by prescription at UHS, the Strong Memorial Hospital Pharmacy, and area drug stores. To purchase birth control pills at UHS, your prescription must be written by a UHS physician or nurse practitioner.

When you begin your last package of birth control pills on your prescription, call UHS (275 2662) to schedule an appointment with your primary care provider or a UHS women's health nurse practitioner for your annual gynecological exam (if necessary) and to obtain a refill for your birth control pill prescription.

If you are purchasing birth control pills at UHS, you may want to buy more than one month's supply at a time to reduce the number of times you must return to purchase your pills. A UHS provider must hand your prescription to you. If all of the providers are currently seeing patients when you arrive to pick

up your pills, you will be asked to wait until a provider is available. The wait could be 15-30 minutes. Buying a few pill cycles at one time will minimize the number of times you must wait to pick up your pills.

## **SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT**

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of gynecological and contraceptive services. You can schedule an appointment with your primary care provider (PCP) or with a UHS women's health nurse practitioner for gynecological care and to discuss contraceptive options. All visits to UHS are strictly confidential.

## **LINKS**

*To learn more about oral contraception, you can visit:*

Planned Parenthood

[http://www.plannedparenthood.org/bc/YOU\\_AND\\_PILL.HTM](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/bc/YOU_AND_PILL.HTM)