

Combined Oral Contraceptive Pills FACT SHEET

Combined oral contraceptive pills or “the pill” are a form of daily birth control. The pills contain two naturally-occurring hormones, an estrogen and a progesterone. There are many different types of pills available, each with slightly different types of hormones and hormone concentrations. Pills work to prevent pregnancy by preventing the egg from being released from the ovary, and also by changing the cervical mucous to prevent sperm from reaching an egg.

A prescription for the pill is required from your health care provider. Pills must be taken every day, at the same time each day, to work properly. Pills are less effective when not taken perfectly. For the typical woman using the pills, it is 91% effective at preventing pregnancy (9 pregnancies in 100 women using the pill for year).

What to do in the case of missed pills:

- If you miss one pill, take the pill as soon as you remember even if it means taking two pills together. Continue taking your pills as usual. No back-up contraception is needed.
- If you miss two pills, take the pill as soon as you remember even if it means taking two pills together. Do not take any earlier missed pills. Use condoms or abstain for the next 7 days.
 - If you have had unprotected intercourse, ask your health care provider about emergency contraception.

Pills do not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Condoms are the best way for sexually active people to reduce the risk of infection. Always use a condom to prevent STIs.

Advantages of pills:

- Decreased pain with periods and/or lighter menstrual periods
- Nothing to do right before sex (to prevent pregnancy)
- May improve PMS (premenstrual syndrome) symptoms
- Can decrease risk of uterine (endometrial) and ovarian cancer
- Ability to become pregnant returns quickly when you stop taking the pill

Disadvantages of pills:

- Must take a pill every day, at the same time each day
- Side effects – some women experience side effects such as breast tenderness, nausea or change in mood or libido. Most of these symptoms improve with time
- The pill may interact with certain epilepsy (anti-seizure) or anti-retroviral medications

Risks of using pills:

- **Venous thromboembolism** – Very rarely, a blood clot can develop in the veins of the legs or in the lungs. These conditions can be life-threatening. Use of the pill increases the chance of developing a blood clot slightly. The risk of having a blood clot while taking the pill is approximately 1 in 500.
- **Stroke or heart attack** – Very rarely, younger women can have a stroke or heart attack. Use of the pill can increase the chance of this happening slightly if you also have other risk factors (such as high blood pressure, smoking or a certain type of migraine headaches).
- **High blood pressure** – The pill can slightly increase your blood pressure. For most women, this increase is small and does not affect your health.

Pills cannot be used by women who:

- Smoke and are 35 years or older
- Have high blood pressure (hypertension)
- Have certain types of migraine headaches
- Have a history of blood clot (DVT or PE), or if you or a family member have certain blood disorders which can increase the risk for a blood clot
- Currently have, or have a history of breast cancer
- Have a history of stroke or heart disease
- Have abnormal vaginal bleeding that has not been evaluated
- Have liver disease
- Have severe diabetes (with eye, nerve or kidney problems)
- Have recently given birth (within 3-6 weeks)

Tell your clinician if you have any of these risk factors or conditions, or of any other past or current medical problems or concerns. Your clinician will evaluate your history to help you decide if pills are the correct choice for you.

Warning signs – Call your healthcare provider or right away if you:

- Think you are pregnant
- Have been, or might have been, exposed to asexually transmitted disease
- Have unusual pain or swelling in the legs, unusual pain in your chest, or difficulty breathing (go directly to an emergency room)
- Have sudden change in vision, severe headache, weakness, numbness or difficulty speaking (go directly to an emergency room)
- Have new or worsening headaches
- Have depression or change in mood

Regular physical examinations for routine health care, STI and cancer screening are strongly recommended.