

ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES

This fact sheet explains the good things and the possible problems of Oral Contraceptives. If you do not understand all the information, or if you have any questions, please ask your clinician.

What are they? Oral Contraceptives (birth control pills) are a safe and effective method of birth control. The pill must be taken orally every day.

You should choose this method of birth control only after reading this fact sheet and discussing your birth control needs with a counselor.

How do Oral Contraceptives prevent pregnancy?

Each of your ovaries contains thousands of unripe eggs. About halfway between the start of one period and the start of the next period, an egg ripens and is released into the tube of the uterus. This is called ovulation. Oral Contraceptives prevent this from happening. The hormones also thicken your cervical mucus so sperm are not able to swim through it.

How effective are Oral Contraceptives? If oral contraceptives are used perfectly (when pills are taken every day at the same time of day as directed and other instructions are followed), only about 1 in 1,000 women may become pregnant within the first year. It is extremely important to take the progestin only pill every day. Also, with the progestin only pill, there is a greater incidence of missing periods and of having irregular periods than with the combination pill.

How are Oral Contraceptives used? It is a pill that must be taken every day at the same time of the day. The first pill should be taken on the Sunday after a period begins and continued daily as instructed. Oral Contraceptives start working in 2 weeks. An alternative form of birth control (like spermicide and condoms) should be used along with the pill during the first 2 weeks. Oral Contraceptives are only effective while you are taking them. As soon as you stop taking the birth control pill, you are no longer protected from pregnancy.

Who may take Oral Contraceptives? Most women can safely use the birth control pills throughout their reproductive years as long as they do not have specific medical problems or risks to avoid the use of pills.

Who should not take Oral Contraceptives?

You should not use birth control pills if

- You are, or suspect you may be pregnant.
- You have abnormal vaginal bleeding that has not yet been evaluated.
- You presently have serious liver disease.
- You have ever had any kind of growth in the liver.
- You are being treated for or have a history of cancer in the breast.
- You have a lump in the breast that has not yet been evaluated.
- You are being treated for or have a history of any estrogen-dependent cancer.
- You are being treated for blood clots in the body or have a history of ever having a blood clot in the body.
- You have ever had a stroke.
- You are 35 years of age or older and you smoke cigarettes.

If you now have or have had a health problem such as migraine headaches, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, are a heavy cigarette smoker, or have gallbladder disease, tell your clinician so that he/she may decide if it is safe for you to take birth control pills. Each of these problems can be made worse by the use of birth control pills.

It is known that if a woman smokes cigarettes while using the pill, she is at a higher risk of medical problems. Therefore, women who use birth control pills are advised not to smoke.

COMMON PROBLEMS

Oral contraceptives can have side effects in some women. Fortunately, the side effects are usually not serious.

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While taking the birth control pill, the following problems could occur:

Minor problems

- a nausea
- spotting between periods
- less menstrual bleeding
- breast tenderness
- weight gain
- headaches
- depression
- high blood pressure
- a darkening of the skin or face
- worsening of acne
- hair loss or increase in hair growth
- decreased sex drive

Major problems

- blood clots of the leg or lung
- stroke or heart attack
- gallbladder disease
- liver tumors

REPORT ANY NEW OR UNUSUAL MEDICAL PROBLEMS TO YOUR CLINICIAN RIGHT AWAY

OTHER MEDICAL DRAWBACKS AND RISKS

- Between 1% and 2% of women will not menstruate for 6 months or more after stopping birth control pills. If you do not have your period return to the clinic for a pregnancy test.
- If your periods are irregular prior to taking pills, they may again become irregular after you stop the pill.
- The estrogen hormone in the pill slightly decreases the quality and quantity of breast milk. Some experts advise against combined birth control pills while breastfeeding if other options are available.
- Lack of protection against STDs. While Oral Contraceptives are a highly effective, convenient method of birth control, they do

not provide any protection against sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, or HIV (the virus that causes AIDS). If you or any of your sexual partners have other partners, it is very important to use a latex condom every time you have sex in order to protect yourself against these infections.

BENEFITS

Many women experience the following benefits from using Oral Contraceptives:

- decreased menstrual cramps
- decreased menstrual bleeding
- more regular menstrual bleeding
- decreased pain at the time of ovulation
- improvement in acne
- less risk of developing ovarian and/or endometrial cancer
- less risk of developing benign breast tumor and/or ovarian cysts
- some women note a reduction in PMS

PRECAUTIONS YOU SHOULD TAKE

Tell any health care provider that you see that you are using Oral Contraceptives.

When taking Oral Contraceptives, you should call your clinic right away if you have any of the following:

- Numbness or severe headaches which are not tension headaches and are not relieved with aspirin
- Severe leg pain (calf or thigh; usually only one leg)
- Severe chest pains, shortness of breath
- Eye problems; blurred vision, flashing lights, or blindness
- Severe abdominal pain