

# Get the facts about...

## Birth Control Pills

### Choosing birth control...

The use of birth control is an individual and private matter. It affects your body, relationships and lifestyle. Your birth control needs and choices will change throughout your life. Get the facts you need and talk to people you trust. Choose a method that's right for you. Always use latex or polyurethane condoms along with your birth control method to lower your chances of getting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV - the virus that causes AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

### How effective is the Pill?

The birth control pill, or the "Pill" – like the patch, injection or vaginal ring – is a highly effective hormonal method of preventing pregnancy when used correctly. (92% to 99.7%)

### Does it protect me from STIs and HIV?

No. The Pill does not protect against sexually transmitted infections. Always use a latex or polyurethane condom when you have sex to reduce your risk of getting an STI or HIV.

### Where can I get the birth control pill?

You must get a prescription from a health care provider. When you get the Pill, s/he will check your blood pressure, and ask about your health and your family's health. You will be offered testing for sexually transmitted infections. You may get an internal examination, to check your uterus and ovaries and a pap test to check the cells on your cervix. This can be done either before you start taking the Pill or in a few months when you come back.

### How does the Pill work?

The combination Pill contains synthetic estrogen and progestin. These hormones stop your ovaries from releasing an ovum (egg) each month. When there is no egg, pregnancy cannot occur.

The Pill also makes the cervical mucus thicker. This makes it harder for sperm to get into the cervix. The cervix is the opening to the uterus (the womb).

The lining of the uterus also gets thinner so it is harder for a fertilized egg to attach to the uterus.

### How do I use the birth control pill?

Your health care provider will tell you when and how to start the Pill.

Birth control pills come in packs of 21 or 28. The first 21 pills in both types of packs contain hormones. In the 28 pack, the last 7 pills don't contain hormones. They are only there to help you to remember to take a pill every day.

- When you first start taking the pill, use a back up method for 7 days if you started taking the pill during your period. If you are starting your first pack when you are not having a period, use a back up method of birth control for 14 days.
- Take 1 pill every day *at the same time* of day.
- Take the pill orally (swallow it).
- Follow the directions on the package to take the pills in the correct order.
- Finish the package.
- If you have a 21 pack, start a new pack of pills after the 7 days off.
- If you have a 28 pack, start a new pack of pills when the last pack is finished.

You will get your period during the 7 days off (if you are taking the 21 pack) or while you are taking the last 7 pills of the 28 pack. It may not start immediately.

You cannot get pregnant during the week you are not taking the pills, unless you have not taken your pills correctly.

This information is about combined hormonal pills (with estrogen and progestin). The progestin-only pill is different. Talk to your health care provider if you have questions about using a pill that does not contain estrogen.

## What are advantages of taking the Pill?

- It is very effective at preventing pregnancy if you take it correctly.
- Your period will be regular, and you may not bleed as heavily. This lowers the risk of iron deficiency anemia.
- The pills that contain estrogen and progestin lower the chances of getting ovarian and endometrial cancers.
- Women over 35 years of age who don't smoke can take the pill.
- The pill reduces the incidence of fibroids, endometriosis and ovarian cysts (which can reduce a woman's fertility).

## What are the disadvantages of the Pill?

- The Pill does not protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STI's), including HIV.
- Smoking while on the pill increases your chances of serious side effects of the Pill.
- You must remember to take your pill at the same time every day.
- You must get a prescription to get the pill.
- The pill costs more than some other birth control methods. However, you can buy it at low cost or get it free at some community health clinics. The cost may be covered by social assistance, private insurance, or First Nations treaty status.

## How safe is the pill?

For healthy women, using the birth control pill is safer than pregnancy and childbirth.

Like any medication, the pill cannot be taken by all women. Be sure to tell your health care provider or pharmacist that you are taking the pill.

Women with the following conditions should not use the combination birth control pill:

- Less than 6 weeks postpartum and breastfeeding (progestin-only pill is an option)
- Past or current risk of having a blood clot
- Over 35 years old and smoke over 15 cigarettes a day (some doctors will not prescribe pills to women this age who smoke at all)
- Blood pressure above 160/100
- Severe heart disease or stroke
- Migraines with aura or neurological symptoms
- Active reproductive cancers
- Diabetes with severe complications
- Liver tumors or active liver disease
- Undiagnosed abnormal bleeding
- Pregnant
- Less than one year since menarche (first began to menstruate/have periods)

If you are trying to get pregnant, you should wait until you have one period after you stop taking the pill.

## Are there any side effects?

### Minor side-effects...

When you begin taking the Pill you may feel some minor side effects. These problems are not dangerous. Most of them will resolve in three months. If the minor side-effects are very uncomfortable or last longer than three months, see your health care provider.

Some side effects formerly associated with the pill are no longer a problem, as dosages have changed.

#### *Common Minor Side Effects:*

- Very light or missed periods (keep taking your pills; you will be protected from pregnancy)
- Bleeding between periods (occurs in the first 3 months; keep taking your pills)  
This can also occur if you miss taking any pills (see “What if I miss a pill?”)
- Nausea (taking the pill with food or before bedtime can help)
- Breast tenderness (short term; and there is no increased risk of breast cancer)

#### *Rare Minor Side Effects:*

- Headaches that are different from usual (call your doctor to discuss this)
- Acne (less than 10% get worse; most women get clearer skin)
- Mood swings (a small number of women are sensitive to the hormones)
- Weight gain (a short-term increase in appetite or in fluid retention for some women; studies show no long-term weight gain caused by the pill)
- Increased facial and body hair growth (less than 10%; changing pills may help)
- Chloasma – rare, uneven darkening of skin’s pigment (may not completely fade after stopping the pill; is more likely in women with darker complexions)
- Less interest in sex or changes in vaginal secretions

**Call Health Links at 788-8200 (Winnipeg) or 1-888-315-9257 if you have concerns about the above side effects.**

### Serious side effects...

A very small number of women suffer more serious side-effects. These include heart attacks, strokes, blood clots in veins, high blood pressure, gallbladder disease, liver tumors, and migraine headaches.

Call or go to a hospital emergency room if you experience:

- headache (severe)
- vision problems
- speech problems
- numbness on any part of your body
- chest pain or breathing problems
- abdominal pain (severe)
- leg pain (severe)
- jaundice (yellow skin)

Your health care provider will help you decide if you can take the Pill.

## What if I miss a pill?

### *If you miss one pill in the first 7 days of your pack:*

- Take it as soon as you remember it. Take your next pill at your regular time. It is okay to take two together if you do not remember until the next day.
- Use condoms for 7 days and continue taking your pills.
- If you forget to take a pill, you may start to bleed (spotting). This is normal. Continue taking your pills.
- Consider calling your health care provider to discuss taking emergency contraception (EC). You can also get EC right away at a pharmacy. The sooner EC is taken, the more effective it will be.

### *If you miss one pill in the day 8 – 21 section in your pack:*

- Take a pill right away and then take the next pill at

your regular time.

- Continue your pack of pills.

### *If you miss two or more pills or are late starting a new pack:*

- Call your health care provider to discuss taking emergency contraception and how to start a new pack of pills.
- Use condoms and another back up method of birth control.

Some women will initially feel nauseated on the pill, but vomiting is rare. If you vomit within one hour of taking a pill, you must take another pill. The pill may not be absorbed if you have persistent vomiting or diarrhea. Use condoms until your symptoms are gone **and** until you have been on a new pack of pills for one week. Call your health care provider if you have any questions.

## What if I miss my period?

Sometimes you can miss a period even if you have taken all your pills correctly. This can be a normal side effect of the pill, or you might be pregnant. Keep taking your pills and have a pregnancy test to find out. Birth control pills are not known to cause birth defects.

If you miss periods often, you may need a different type of birth control pill.

**If you have missed any pills and miss a period, have a pregnancy test done right away.**

## Remember...

- The Pill is most effective when you take one every day at the same time. To help you remember, combine taking the Pill with something else you do every day at the same time, such as going to bed, eating a meal, or brushing your teeth.
- The Pill does not work right away. Use another birth control method such as condoms with foam, sponge, or diaphragm for the first two weeks of your very first pill pack (or for at least one week if you started your pills while having your regular period).
- The Pill protects against pregnancy but does not protect against STIs.
- The Pill does not protect against pregnancy once you stop taking it.

## Where can I get more information?

You can get more information from your public health nurse, community health clinic, health care provider or pharmacist. You can call the ***Facts of Life Line*** to talk about birth control, sexuality, relationships, STIs, and pregnancy options. **Call 947-9222 in Winnipeg or toll-free in Manitoba at 1-800-432-1957.**

You can also check out this website: [www.serc.mb.ca](http://www.serc.mb.ca).

References: *Contraceptive Technology, 18<sup>th</sup> rev. ed.*, Hatcher, et al., 2004;  
*Sex Sense, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, 2005.