

What You Should Know About ...

See Glossary section for definitions of underlined words.

The Birth Control Pill

What is a birth control pill?

- The birth control pill (the Pill) is taken orally (by mouth) to prevent pregnancy.
- It contains man-made hormones similar to the natural hormones that already exist in your body.

How does the Pill work?

- The Pill stops your ovaries from releasing an ovum (egg) each month. If there is no egg, you cannot get pregnant.
- The Pill makes the cervical mucous thicker. This makes it harder for sperm to get into the uterus.
- The lining of the uterus gets thinner so it is harder for a fertilized egg to stick to the uterus. Even if an egg is released and fertilized, it will not continue to grow.

Does the Pill protect me from STIs and HIV?

- **No.** The Pill does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Always use a latex or polyurethane male condom or a female condom when you have sex. This will reduce your risk of getting an STI or HIV infection.

Where can I get the Pill?

You can get the pill from:

- your health care provider
- a teen clinic
- a walk-in clinic
- a community health clinic

How do I use the 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.

If you are taking the 21 pack, 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.

Will the Pill affect my period?

- The birth control pill should make your period regular.
- You may not bleed as much, or have as many cramps.

Does anything stop the Pill from working?

- Throwing up or having diarrhea one to four hours after you take your pill may flush the Pill from your body. This may mean the Pill will not work. **Be sure to use another method of birth control (e.g., condom) for the rest of your pill package.**
- Some drugs that you take can stop the Pill from working. **If you take any drugs, tell your doctor or pharmacist that you are on the Pill. While you are taking these drugs, continue taking the Pill but use another birth control method as well.**

How effective is the Pill?

- The Pill prevents pregnancy 97-99% of the time.
- It is very effective when you take one every day at the same time.

Are there any side effects?

Minor side-effects

When you begin taking the Pill you may feel some minor side effects. These are not dangerous. If they are very uncomfortable or last longer than a few months, talk to your doctor.

Some *common* minor side effects include:

- Nausea (feeling sick to the stomach). Sometimes taking the Pill with food or before bedtime helps get rid of nausea
- sore breasts
- bleeding between periods
- very light or missed periods

Some *uncommon* minor side effects include:

- headaches
- mood swings or depression
- weight change
- less interest in sex
- acne (pimples)
- increased hair growth

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.

See a doctor immediately if you have...

- abdominal (stomach) pain (severe)
- chest pain (severe), or breathing problems
- headache (severe), dizziness
- weakness or numbness in any part of your body
- eye problems (vision loss or blurring)
- speech problems
- severe leg pain (calf or thigh)
- jaundice (yellow skin)

Your health care provider will help you decide if you should 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 the right way. 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 whether or not you are pregnant.
- If you miss periods often, talk to your health care provider.
- If you have missed any pills and miss a period, have a pregnancy test done right away.

Is the Pill safe for all women to use?

- No. Ask your health care provider if it is right for you. Tell him/her about any medical problems (i.e. with circulation, migraines, cancer, etc.).
- Smoking while taking the Pill increases the chance of serious side effects.

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 week or two weeks (see 'How Do I Use the Pill?').
- 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?

- From your health care provider, community health clinic, or public health nurse.
- From the Facts of Life On-Line: e-mail your questions to thefactsoflife@serc.mb.ca.
- From the following website: www.sexualityandu.ca.

If this method fails, and if you don't want to get pregnant, see a health care provider or pharmacist for emergency contraception as soon as you can.

Glossary:

Cervical mucous – The fluid produced by the cervix (the lower part of the uterus that opens into the vagina). The mucous changes at different times of the menstrual cycle. Around the time of ovulation, the mucous is clear and slippery.

Emergency Contraception – Medication used to avoid pregnancy *after* sex when you didn't use birth control or the birth control didn't work (for example, the condom broke).

Ovaries – The female organs that store and release egg cells and produce the hormones estrogen and progesterone.

Uterus – A pear-shaped, hollow organ with muscular walls. The fetus grows in the uterus during pregnancy. The uterus is also called the "womb".