

# Possible Side Effects

Plan to use this method for at least three months. Some of the minor side effects you may experience will subside within this period of time. Other side effects may be eliminated by changing your pill prescription to a different combination of hormones which may be more compatible with your body chemistry.

A few women will experience side effects when starting oral contraceptives. Keep a calendar of any side effects you experience. This will be important should you need to change pills.

- Spotting. Occurs most often in the first few months of pill use. It is often temporary and usually does not indicate any serious problems. It is important to continue taking your pills on schedule. If the bleeding occurs in more than one cycle or lasts for more than a few days, call your clinician.
- Weight gain or loss. Usually a 2-5 pound fluctuation and is frequently due to fluid retention. Limit your sodium intake to minimize this.
- Nausea. May occur when you begin oral contraceptives. This usually resolves by the third pack. If you experience this, try taking the pill with a meal.
- Breast tenderness. You may experience premenstrual breast tenderness, even if you never had it before. It usually subsides in a few weeks.

# When to Call Your Clinician

If you are experiencing any unexpected side effects such as:

- severe headaches
- depression or severe mood swings
- darkening of skin, especially of the face
- vaginal infections
- two consecutively missed menstrual periods

# If You Miss a Period

If you have taken your pills regularly and miss one menstrual period, continue taking your pills for the next cycle.

If you have not taken your pills daily and miss a menstrual period, make an appointment with your clinician to check for pregnancy. If you miss two consecutive menstrual periods, see your clinician to determine if you might be pregnant.

# Common Concerns

There is no evidence of increased risk of cancer of the breast or cervix associated with pill use. However, intercourse at a young age with multiple partners has been linked to cervical cancer.

There is no evidence that using the pill will prevent a woman from becoming pregnant after pill discontinuation. If periods were infrequent and irregular prior to pill use, it is likely that the pattern will return to this after pill cessation. If pregnancy is desired, the pill should be discontinued and another method of contraception used until normal cycles are resumed for at least three months.

# Warning Signals

Women taking oral contraceptives are strongly advised NOT to smoke because smoking increases the risk of heart attack and stroke. In every age category the risk of death from blood clotting disorders is higher in pill users who smoke than in users who do not.

If you smoke, you must stop using oral contraceptives at age 35 due to increased cardiovascular risks. Nonsmokers may use oral contraceptives until menopause.

The following symptoms may indicate serious problems. Do not ignore them. See your clinician immediately if any of the following occurs.

SIGNAL	POSSIBLE PROBLEM
Sharp chest pain or sudden shortness of breath.	Blood clot in the lung
Pain in the calf	Blood clot in the leg
Sudden severe headache or vomiting, disturbance of vision or speech, numbness in an extremity	Stroke
Yellowing of the skin, eyeballs, fever, dark urine	Liver problem
Severe abdominal pain	Gallbladder or liver problem



Sindecuse  
**Health Center**  
Western Michigan University  
*...for a Healthy Community*  
(269) 387-3287  
www.sindecuse.com

B126  
05/07

# Oral Contraceptives



What  
You  
Need  
to  
Know

Effectiveness  
Advantages  
Starting the pill  
If pills are missed  
Risks & side effects

Sindecuse Health Center

# Oral Contraceptives

It is the responsibility of any woman who considers using oral contraceptives (the pill) to understand the benefits and risks of using this form of birth control. Read the package insert that comes with your pills.

Oral contraceptive pills are a combination of synthetically produced hormones, estrogen and progesterone. These hormones cause ovulation to cease, resulting in prevention of pregnancy. Having a period when on the pill is caused by a drop in the hormone levels when hormone pills are withdrawn.

Birth control pills do not protect against sexually transmitted diseases, including the virus that causes AIDS. Condoms should be used along with the birth control pill to protect against STI's if applicable.

## Effectiveness

The chance of becoming pregnant is less than 1% (1 pregnancy per 100 women per year of perfect use) when oral contraceptives are used perfectly, without missing any pills. Failure rates increase with each missed pill during a cycle.

# Non-Contraceptive Health Benefits

Effects on menses:

- increased menstrual period regularity
- decreased blood loss and decreased incidence of iron-deficiency anemias
- decreased incidence of menstrual cramps

Effects related to inhibition of ovulation:

- decreased incidence of functional ovarian cysts
- decreased incidence of ectopic pregnancies

Other effects:

- decreased incidence of fibroadenomas and fibrocystic breast symptoms
- decreased incidence of uterine cancer
- decreased incidence of ovarian cancer

## Getting Pills

If you are starting oral contraceptives for the first time or you've changed your pill type, you will be asked to return for a blood pressure and weight check with a nurse. You do not need to make an appointment for this. If you are not experiencing any problems, the nurse will give you a prescription for enough cycles to last until your next annual exam. A yearly exam with your clinician will be necessary for continued use of the pills.



# Starting Your Pills - The First Cycle

Instructions in the package insert of your pills may vary regarding how to begin taking the pills. For clarity and simplicity, we recommend a "Sunday Start" method.

Start your first 28 day pack of pills on the first Sunday after the first day of your next menstrual period, even if you are still bleeding. If your period begins on a Sunday, take your first pill that same day.

If your period starts on:	Take your pill on:
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday	➔ The following Sunday
Sunday	➔ That same day (Sunday)

Use a second effective method of contraception, such as condoms, or abstain from intercourse until you have taken your pills for one full week.

## Taking Pills During the Month

Take one pill at the same time every day until the pack is empty. Try to associate taking your pills with a regular activity, like brushing your teeth every morning or eating a meal. Taking your pill should become a part of your daily routine. Check your pack each morning to make sure you took the pill the day before.

When you finish a pack or switch your brand of pills, start the next pack on the day after your last pill of the previous pack. Do not wait any days between packs.

# Missing Pills

If you miss ONE pill:

- Take it as soon as you remember. Take the next pill at your regular time. You may be taking two pills at the same time. Continue taking your remaining pills daily until the cycle is finished.
- Use a backup birth control method for 7 days.

If you miss MORE THAN ONE PILL:

- Do not take those tablets missed, but begin taking tablets again as soon as remembered
- Use another method of contraception until you start a new pack of pills.
- You may spot or begin to flow, but continue your pills daily.

OR:

- Keep taking one pill every day until Sunday. On Sunday, throw out the rest of the pack and start a new pack of pills that same day.
- Use a backup birth control method for 7 days.

## Considerations Related to Effectiveness

- If you vomit within two hours after taking a pill, use a second method of contraception for the remainder of the cycle.
- If you need to take other medications while you are on the pill, ask your clinician about interaction with oral contraceptives. Some medications may interfere with absorption of the pill. You should use a backup method of contraception when at risk.
- Use a backup birth control method for 7 days.
- If you would like to reschedule your menstrual period, call your clinician for instructions far in advance.