



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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Birth Control Pill Instructions

The birth control pill is safe *and* effective. However, birth control pills do not protect you from AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Consider all the approaches you have heard about preventing HIV infection. To reduce the risk of STIs, use a condom every time you have sexual intercourse.

1. The pill works primarily by stopping ovulation (release of an egg). Pills are very effective if swallowed at the same time every day and if instructions regarding other medication use or use during episodes of diarrhea or vomiting are followed.
2. Benefits of the pill, in addition to preventing pregnancy, include : a decreased risk for ovarian cancer, cancer of the lining of the uterus, benign breast masses, and ovarian cysts. Pills decrease menstrual blood loss and menstrual cramps. Pills also decrease your chance of having an ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy outside of the uterus).
3. Most side effects of the pill are not serious. The most common side effects which may occur are nausea, vomiting, bleeding between periods, weight gain and breast tenderness. Most of these side effects resolve in the first three months of pill use. Serious side effects of the pill are rare, especially among young healthy women. Potential serious side effects include: blood clots in the leg, lung, brain, or heart; rare liver tumors; high blood pressure; and gall bladder disease. Smoking increases the risk of these cardiovascular side effects. If you smoke, have high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, jaundice, if you have or have had cancer or liver tumors, taking oral contraceptives can increase the risk of serious side effects.
4. **Choose a back-up method of birth control** (such as condoms) to use with your first pack of pills because the pills may not fully protect you from pregnancy during this first cycle. Keep this back-up method handy all the time and learn to use it correctly in case you:
 - Run out of pills.
 - Forget to take your pills.
 - Experience a serious pill warning signal and discontinue pill use.
 - Want protection from sexually transmitted infections, most notably HIV, the virus that causes AIDS (condoms provide the best protection).
 - Have repeated episodes of breakthrough bleeding.

5. You may start taking your pills according to one of two different schedules. The possible schedules are:

- Starting on the first day of menstrual bleeding
- Starting on the first Sunday after your period begins

Since daily pill taking is a new habit, we recommend you use a back-up method for the first three weeks.

6. Take one pill a day until you finish the pack. Then:

- If you are using a 28-day pack, begin a new pack immediately. Skip no days between packages.
- If you are using a 21-day pack, stop taking pills for 1 week and then start your new pack.

7. **Try to associate taking your pill with something else that you do at about the same time every day**, like going to bed, eating a meal, or brushing your teeth. A regular routine may make it easier to remember your pills. Pills work best if you take one about the same time every day in order to keep a steady level of hormones in your system.

8. **Check your pack of birth control pills each morning** to make sure you took your pill the day before.

9. Try to take your pills at the same time every day. If you have spotting (light bleeding between periods) for 2 or more cycles, you may want to call your clinician to see whether you need a different pill. Spotting is more likely to occur with the current low-dose birth control pills. Because spotting is generally not a sign of any serious problem in young women, your clinician may take a "watch-and-wait" approach if you are not concerned or inconvenienced. If you suddenly begin to have bleeding between periods, and have not previously had this problem, or have not missed pills or taken pills late, consider having your clinician check you for an infection. Spotting between periods may also signal decreased pill effectiveness. Some clinicians recommend a back-up contraceptive for women experiencing spotting on pills, especially if the woman is taking a medication that may lower pill effectiveness.

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10. Taking vitamin C may actually increase the level of estrogen in your blood and may lead to increased spotting. Some medications, (antibiotics, anti-convulsants and barbituates) and some herbal supplements can reduce the effectiveness of the pill. When taking these medications use a back up method of contraception.

11. What to do if you miss an active hormone pill or pills

1. Missed 1 pill any week?

Take the missed pill ASAP or take it with your next pill at the usual time. To be perfectly safe use a backup form of birth control for 7 days.

2. Missed 2 pills in week 1 or 2 of your pill pack?

Take 2 pills now, take 2 pills tomorrow. Then continue to take 1 pill a day until you finish the pack. Use a backup form of birth control for 7 days after the missed pills.

3. Missed 2 pills in week 3 or missed 3 or more pills any week?

For Sunday Starters: Take 1 pill each day through Saturday.

On Sunday, throw out the pack and start a new pack. Use a backup form of birth control for 7 days (until you have taken 7 birth control pills).

For Day 1 Starters: Throw out the pack. Start new pack the same day. Use a backup form of birth control for 7 days (until you have taken 7 birth control pills).

It is normal to experience some spotting or even a light flow when you miss a pill. Should you have further questions please contact your provider or Women's Health. The Women's Health phone number is (301) 314-8190.

12. **If you have diarrhea or vomiting** within 2 hours of taking the pill, use your back-up method of birth control until your next period. Start using a back-up method on your first day of diarrhea or vomiting. Many women experience nausea the first month they take pills. This tends to go away in the next cycle or so. If nausea continues, switching to the lowest estrogen pill may be very helpful. See your healthcare provider.

13. Women taking pills note that periods tend to be short and scanty, and you may see no fresh blood at all. **A drop of blood, or a brown smudge on your tampon or on your underwear is considered a period when you are on the pill.**

14. **If you do not have your menstrual period** when expected while taking birth control pills, you may want to consult your clinician.

• **If you have not missed any pills and you miss one period**

without any other signs of pregnancy, pregnancy is very unlikely. Many women taking birth control pills occasionally miss one period. Call the clinic if you are worried. You are fairly safe and can start a new package of pills at the regularly scheduled time.

• **If you forget one or more pills and miss a period**, you should contact your clinic for a sensitive pregnancy test as soon as possible.

• **If you miss two periods in a row**, come to the clinic for a pregnancy test immediately, even if you took your pills everyday.

15. **If you do become pregnant** while taking birth control pills, you must decide whether you want to have a child at this time or, alternatively, whether abortion is an option for you. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recently concluded that pills do not increase the risk for birth defects.

16. **If you decide you want to become pregnant**, stop taking pills. You may wish to use another reliable method of birth control until you have two or three normal menstrual periods off the pill so that when you become pregnant, your date of delivery might be more accurately calculated. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recently concluded that "There is no evidence that oral contraceptive use decreases subsequent fertility. After oral contraceptive use is stopped, there may be a short delay of 1-2 months in the reestablishment of menses and ovulation."

17. **If you notice any pronounced mood changes—**depression, irritability, change in sex drive—see your clinician. Switching pill brands may help if your mood changes are pill-related. Your clinician can help in assessing what to do to help you.

18. Learn the pill warning signals. Any one of these symptoms may mean that you are in serious trouble. Note that the first letter of each symptom spells out the word "ACHES."

Early Pill Danger Signs

- A** • Abdominal pain (severe)
- C** • Chest Pain (severe), cough, shortness of breath
- H** • Headache (severe), dizziness, weakness, or numbness
- E** • Eye problems (vision loss or blurring), speech problems
- S** • Severe leg pain (calf or thigh)

If you smoke, stop smoking. We can assist you with our smoking cessation program. To get more information on the program call 301.314.8124. If you can't quit, it is all the more important that you watch for the pill warning signals.

See your clinician if you have any of these problems, or if you develop depression, yellow jaundice, or a breast lump.

Do not ignore these problems or wait to see if they disappear. Contact your clinic or doctor immediately to tell them about your problem. Birth control pills are safer when you get help as soon as problems arise.

19. Be sure to save the last empty package of pills for your prescription number to get refills at the pharmacy.

20. Return in 3 months, then every 6-12 months for a pill refill appointment. Call 301.314.8190 to schedule an appointment. A pap and pelvic exam is required once a year (an appointment is required for this exam).

21. If you change brands or dosage, treat as if just starting on the pill and use another method of birth control with that first package.

The birth control pill does not protect you from sexually transmitted infections. Condoms help provide protection.