



## THE PILL (Oral Contraceptive)

### What are Birth Control Pills?

There are many different brands of The Pill. Some come in packs of 21 or 28 pills. One pill is taken orally (swallowed) every day. The first 21 pills have a combination of synthetic estrogen and progesterone hormones that work to prevent fertilization. The last seven pills of a 28-day pack are hormone-free pills called spacers. The hormones stop ovulation (the process of the ovaries releasing eggs), as well as thicken cervical mucus to make it harder for sperm to enter the uterus. The Pill is 92 to 99.7% effective as birth control, but does not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STI) including HIV/AIDS.

### Use

If The Pill is started within six days after an abortion or the start of a period, it is effective immediately. If the Pill is started at other times, it will be effective after one month. Condoms can also be used to lower the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

*Starting The Pill:* There are several ways to begin taking The Pill. One common way is to start on the first day of your period or the first day after an abortion. Some women prefer to start on the first Sunday after either of these events.

*Continuing:* Take one pill every day until you finish an entire pack. Try to link taking The Pill with a regular activity that you do at the same time every day, like eating a meal or brushing your teeth. If you have a 28-day pack, start a new pack immediately after you finish the old one. If you have a 21-day pack, take one pill every day for 21 days, no pills for seven days, then start the new pack immediately.

### Missed Pills: Late Start

The most common way women get pregnant while using The Pill is starting the next package late.

*1 day late starting the next package:* Take two pills as soon as you remember and one pill each day after. Use a backup form of birth control for two weeks.

*2 days late starting the next package:* Take two pills per day for two days, then continue as usual. Use a backup form of birth control for two weeks.

*3 or more days late starting the next package:* Call the clinic for instructions.

### Missed Pills: During the Cycle

*1 pill missed:* Take it as soon as you remember and take your next pill at your usual time. This may mean taking two pills in one day.

*2 pills missed in a row in the first two weeks:* Take two pills on the day you remember and two pills the next day. Finish the rest of the pack as usual. Use a backup form of birth control for one week.

*2 pills missed in a row in the third week:* Keep taking one pill every day until Sunday. On Sunday, set aside the rest of the pack and start taking a new pack of pills. Use a backup form of birth control for one week.

*3 or more pills missed in a row anytime:* Keep taking one pill every day until Sunday. On Sunday, set aside the rest of the pack and start taking a new pack of pills. Use a backup form of birth control for two weeks.

Missing any of the last seven pills of a 28-day package will not raise your risk of pregnancy. Skip the pills you missed, but be sure you start your next pack on time.

### Drug Interactions

The effectiveness of the Pill is lowered when taken with certain medications, including antibiotics, anti-seizure, tuberculosis, and migraine medications. If you are taking any medications, tell your clinician. When taking medications that may interfere with The Pill, consider adding a backup method of birth control, like condoms and spermicide. As with all drugs, it is useful to inform all your medical providers if you are using hormonal birth control in order to manage drug interactions.

### Your Health

Some women may not be able to take The Pill because of the risk of serious health problems. Women who are over 35 and smoke or who have any of the following conditions should not take The Pill:

- ◆ History of heart attack or stroke
- ◆ Blood clots
- ◆ Unexplained vaginal bleeding
- ◆ Known or suspected cancer
- ◆ Known or suspected pregnancy
- ◆ Liver disease

Women who have the following conditions *may* or *may not* be able to take The Pill, and must first consult with their clinician or doctor:

- ◆ Migraines
- ◆ Gallbladder disease
- ◆ Hypertension
- ◆ Diabetes
- ◆ Epilepsy
- ◆ Sickle cell disease
- ◆ Have had elective surgery
- ◆ Have a history of blood clots, liver or heart disease

Women who use The Pill have a higher risk of heart attack and stroke. The effects of The Pill on breast cancer are still unknown. The Pill lowers a woman's chance of developing ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer, and pelvic inflammatory disease.

### Side Effects

As the body adjusts to hormonal changes created by The Pill, women often experience some minor side effects, including:

- ◆ Irregular bleeding or spotting
- ◆ Nausea
- ◆ Breast tenderness
- ◆ Weight gain and/or water retention
- ◆ Spotty darkening of the skin
- ◆ Mood changes

Side effects usually disappear after two to three cycles. If your side effects are bothersome after this time or if heavy bleeding occurs, continue taking your pills and call the clinic for an appointment to talk about your prescription.

### Danger Signs

Women who experience any of the following 'ACHES' symptoms while taking The Pill should call the clinic immediately:

- A**bdominal pains (severe)
- C**hest pain or shortness of breath
- H**eadaches (severe)
- E**ye problems, such as blurred vision
- S**evere leg or arm pain or numbness

### Missed periods

Missing a period does not always mean you are pregnant. Pregnancy is more likely:

- ◆ in the first few months of Pill use,
- ◆ if you missed taking any Pills,
- ◆ if you are taking another medication (especially antibiotics), or
- ◆ if you have been sick (vomiting and/or diarrhea).

If you forgot one or more pills and do not have a period that month, we recommend that you have a sensitive pregnancy test done at a clinic.

If you miss two periods in a row, it could either be normal or a sign of pregnancy. Pregnancy tests are recommended right away. If you become pregnant while on The Pill, there is probably no risk of birth defects.

### Future Fertility

Women who want to become pregnant may stop using The Pill at any time. Fertility may return immediately or after a few months.

### Advantages and Disadvantages

#### Advantages

- ◆ Can regulate periods or lighten them
- ◆ Easy to use
- ◆ Does not harm future fertility
- ◆ Does not interrupt sex play
- ◆ May protect against uterine and ovarian cancers
- ◆ May reduce acne
- ◆ Can be used for emergency contraception

#### Disadvantages

- ◆ Does not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STI) including HIV/AIDS
- ◆ Must be taken every day
- ◆ Less effective when taken with some medications.
- ◆ Raises risk of heart attack and stroke
- ◆ Requires a prescription

### Emergency Contraception

You can prevent pregnancy after unprotected intercourse by having a copper IUD inserted within one week of unprotected intercourse or by taking emergency contraception pills (the morning after pill). The pills work best in the first 24 to 48 hours but may work for several days. You can get one brand, Plan B, from your local pharmacy or at Cedar River Clinics in Renton or Tacoma.

To find Emergency Contraception, see this website: [ec.princeton.edu](http://ec.princeton.edu). If you already have birth control pills in your possession, this website explains how to use them as emergency contraception.

Some women are buying Plan B in advance so they will have it on hand if they need it.

### Further Resources

- Our Bodies, Ourselves. [www.ourbodiesourselves.org](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org)
- [www.avert.org](http://www.avert.org) - dedicated to averting HIV and AIDS
- Feminist Women's Health Center at [www.FWHC.org](http://www.FWHC.org)
- If you are uninsured in WA State, you may qualify for FREE birth control under Take Charge, a state program, Teens do not need parent's permission. Call 800-770-4334 for info. Apply at Cedar River Clinics.

**Cedar River Clinics** make birth control and abortion accessible so that women may decide their futures. [www.CedarRiverClinics.org](http://www.CedarRiverClinics.org) or 800-572-4223