

The Birth Control Pill

How effective is the birth control pill?

The risk of pregnancy during 1 year of use of the birth control pill is about 2% (or, put another way, 2 out of every 100 women using the birth control pill for a year will get pregnant). The risk of pregnancy using the rhythm method of birth control is about 20%. The risk of pregnancy using the diaphragm is about 15%. The risk of pregnancy using condoms and foam is about 10%. The risk with Norplant is about 1%.

How do I start?

Take your first pill on the Sunday after your period starts. If your period begins on a Sunday take your first pill that very day. Take one pill every day at the same time of day. Take it at a time that will be easy for you to remember, like bedtime or breakfast.

How soon am I protected from pregnancy?

You will not be protected until you finish your first pack of pills. It is important to use another form of birth control like foam and condoms (rubbers) during your first pack of pills.

The birth control pill does not protect you against the AIDS virus and other sexually transmitted diseases. For those women who have been with one partner for many years, the risk of sexually transmitted diseases is very low. However, if you have had a number of different partners over the past few years, I would strongly recommend that you continue to have your partner use a condom even though you are on the birth control pill. If you have any questions about AIDS or any other sexually transmitted disease (like chlamydia and gonorrhea), please discuss them with me.

What will my period be like?

Your period will usually start during the fourth week of pills. Menstrual flow is usually lighter, and may have a different color and consistency than your usual flow. As long as bleeding occurs during the expected time, this is normal.

What if I forget to take a pill?

If you forget to take the pill at your usual time, take it as soon as you remember. Or take two the next day, whichever is sooner and continue on your regular schedule.

If you miss two pills:

Take 2 pills for the next 2 days at your regular time, then continue as usual, taking 1 pill each day until all the pills are taken. You may have some bleeding. If the bleeding is like a period, call my office and report this to the nurse. She will give you further instructions. Never take more than 2 pills in one day. You will also need to use an extra form of birth control such as foam and condoms until you start a new pack of pills.

What about the next pack?

You will always start each new pack of pills on a Sunday and finish on a Saturday. Begin your new pack on Sunday even if you are still on your menstrual period.

What are common side effects?

These common side effects usually decrease after the second pack of pills:

- temporary weight gain of 5-10 pounds
- spotting or very slight vaginal bleeding
- breast swelling and tenderness
- nausea and vomiting
- bloated, feeling of fullness

Less common, though more serious potential side effects include high blood pressure, clots in the veins in you legs, strokes, and heart attacks. For women under age 35 who do not smoke, the risk of death from any of these problems is very small (on the order of 1 in 100,000 per year). The risk of death due to pregnancy is about 10 in 100,000; thus, it is much safer to use the birth control pill and not get pregnant. However, if you are a smoker, the risk of death due to the birth control pill rises to about 2-10 in 100,000. If you are a smoker over the age of 35 taking the birth control pill, that risk rises even further to about 50 in 100,000.

When should I call your office?

Report any of the following symptoms to me:

- abdominal pain (severe)
- chest pain (severe, shortness of breath)
- headaches (severe, that don't go away with aspirin)
- eye problems (sudden blurred or loss of vision)
- severe leg pain (calf or thigh) or swelling
- weakness or tingling in your face, arms, or legs

If you need more pills, call for a refill during office hours before your pack is finished. You will need to come in for regular check-ups, including an annual Pap smear and breast exam, while you are taking the birth control pill.

Can I take other medicines?

If you have to take an antibiotic such as amoxicillin or doxycycline, you will need to use an extra form of birth control, such as foam and condoms during that month. These antibiotics can decrease the effectiveness of the pill. You could get pregnant if you don't use a backup method.

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