



STUDENT WELLNESS SERVICES

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COMBINED ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES (THE PILL)

Background Information

Oral contraceptives (OCPs) or birth control pills (“the Pill”) are used to prevent pregnancy and regulate the menstrual cycle. Introduced in the 1960s, OCPs have a long history of providing effective birth control for women in their reproductive years. First year, perfect use failure rate of most Combined Oral Contraceptive pills is less than 1%. On average, OCP’s are 93-97% effective because of missed pills or failure to start a new pack of pills on time.

Women who cannot and should not take combined oral contraceptives

Women who have thrombophlebitis or thromboembolic disorders, cerebro-vascular or coronary artery disease, carcinoma of the breast or other estrogen-dependent neoplasia, undiagnosed abnormal genital bleeding, known or suspected pregnancy, benign or malignant liver tumor or liver disease, migraine headache with aura or uncontrolled high blood pressure. Talk to your provider if you have any of these conditions.

Pill Options

OCPs come in one of 2 formulations, monophasic or triphasic pills:

- Monophasic pills- Contain the same combination of estrogen and progesterone in each of the 21 day active pills. This is the most commonly used type of OCP. The advantage of monophasic pills are easy to use and can be restarted if pills are missed.
- Triphasic pills- Contains three different doses of hormones during the first 3 weeks of active pills. This method tries to mimic the natural hormonal cycle.

General Use

Choose one of three start dates:

1. First day of period. Start the pill on the first day of your period. Continue to take one pill daily at the same time each day.
2. Start any day (Quick start). Take the first pill at a good time for you. Continue to take 1 pill daily at the same time every day. Use this start only if it is certain there is no pregnancy.
3. First Sunday. Take your first pill on the first Sunday following the start of your period. If your period starts on Sunday, start the pill on that Sunday. Continue to take 1 pill daily at the same time each day.
4. OCPs must be taken daily and their use monitored regularly.

DURING THE 1ST 7 DAYS OF OCP USE, A BACK-UP METHOD (vaginal spermicide plus condom, condoms or abstinence) IS NEEDED since the pill may not fully protect against pregnancy. Some clinicians recommend a back-up method for the ENTIRE 1ST MONTH OF USE to ensure more effective pregnancy prevention.

If you miss a pill...

1. If you miss 1 pill, take the forgotten pill as soon as you remember, and take today’s pill at the regular time. Be sure to use a backup method of birth control until you get your next period.

2. If you miss 2 pills in a row, take the 2 pills as soon as you remember. Then continue taking your pills as usual. Be sure to use a backup method of birth control until you get your next period.
3. If you missed 3 pills in a row, throw away the pack of pills. Use another method of birth control. Wait for your next period and restart a new pack of pills. Continue using a backup method of birth control for the FIRST 2 WEEKS that you're taking the new pack of pills. If you have any questions, contact one of the clinicians at the Student Health Center.

Extended/Continuous Cycling

Extended cycling means that the 7 days of inactive pills are not taken. For example, a 21 day cycle of hormone pills are taken, followed by another 21 day cycle of hormone pills. With this method, a normal period does not occur. It offers advantages to patients with certain medical conditions, such as endometriosis. Before starting this method, speak to one of your medical providers.

Side-Effects

Minor: Nausea, spotting or breakthrough bleeding, absent period, breast enlargement or tenderness, slight weight gain, mood or libido changes, or vaginal yeast infections. These side effects usually resolve after 2-3 months.

Major: Blood clots, stroke, hypertension, heart attack. These side effects are extremely rare and occur most often in women who smoke, are over age 35 or have her health problems such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease or vascular disease.

Danger signs: If you develop any of these symptoms, call the Student Health Center and speak to one of the medical providers. Otherwise, go to the nearest Urgent Care Center for evaluation.

1. Abdominal pain- severe
2. Chest pain- shortness of breath, coughing up blood
3. Headaches severe- dizziness, weakness
4. Eye problems- blurred or loss of vision
5. Slurred or confused speech
6. Severe leg pain in calf or thigh

The Pill and other drugs

Inform one of the medical providers of ANY and ALL prescribed or non-prescribed DRUG USE. OCPs can interfere with the action of other medicines and proper use of both requires medical evaluation.

The Pill and Sexually Transmitted Illnesses

OCPs do not protect against sexually transmitted infections. To reduce risk of sexually transmitted infections, use condoms/barriers devices and have screening for sexually transmitted infections.

Additional Information

Check our website:

<http://wellness.caltech.edu/services/health-services/sexual-health>

For any other questions or problems, call the Student Health Center at (626) 395-6393 or make an appointment with any of the medical providers for a consultation.