Birth control pills, also known as Oral Contraceptives (OCs), are one of the most effective methods to prevent pregnancy and/or treat other health issues.

Birth control pills are the most extensively studied drugs ever prescribed. Most are made up of two synthetic hormones, an estrogen and a progestin. To minimize side-effects, medical clinicians prescribe pills which contain the lowest amount of hormone. They provide just enough estrogen each day to prevent the release of FSH (follicle stimulating hormone) and LH (luteinizing hormone), thus inhibiting ovulation. The progestin component of the pill causes the cervical mucus to thicken, creating a barrier to sperm. Progestin also makes the lining of the uterus unsuitable for egg implantation.

Is “the pill” right for you?
The birth control pill is a highly effective reversible contraceptive. Many people choose to take the pill simply because of its beneficial side-effects:

• regulates menstrual periods
• permits sexual spontaneity
• relieves some menstrual problems (e.g. can shorten periods; reduce the incidence of iron deficiency anemia; minimize cramps and PMS; correct menstrual irregularity)
• manages symptoms of endometriosis
• decreases the incidence of ovarian cysts
• lowers the risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer
• can diminish acne

What can be expected
The effectiveness of birth control pills is maximized when a pill is taken around the same time of day, every day.

Remember that birth control pills:
• do not protect against sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) such as HPV, herpes, Chlamydia, and HIV
• must be taken around the same time daily
• may have temporary side-effects: small weight gain (3–5 lb. average), nausea, headache, mood swings
• may not be effective when used with certain medications
• may require a back-up method (e.g. condom) at initial start up and if you miss two or more pills

Common side-effects (which often disappear 2-3 months after starting the pill) include:

• **Spotting or breakthrough bleeding** between periods while your body adjusts to the hormones. This bleeding does not indicate diminished contraceptive protection unless you have taken pills irregularly (in which case additional contraception is recommended). It is important you continue to take your pills at the same time each day if you experience spotting.
• **Nausea.** If nausea occurs, try taking your pill with food, milk, or before bedtime.
• **Breast fullness and/or tenderness** may be related to the estrogen or progestin in the pill and should diminish with time.

If any of these problems persist after three pill cycles or seem severe, call for an appointment with a medical clinician. Most problems can be relieved by changing to a different pill, or a different contraceptive method.

What are the contraindications?

**Cigarette smoking:** Smoking increases the risk of serious cardiovascular problems from oral contraceptive use. The risk increases with age and the amount of smoking. Those who use oral contraceptives are strongly urged not to smoke.

**Chronic conditions:** If you have a chronic medical problem, discuss the risks of taking the pill as it relates to your particular situation. Most of the time, taking the pill is relatively safe. However, if you have any of the following conditions, check with your clinician about your ability to use estrogen-containing oral contraceptives:

• thrombophlebitis, thromboembolic disorders, cerebral vascular disease, coronary artery disease or past history of these conditions
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• Ask for a “Well Woman visit” if it is time for your Pap smear and/or check-up.

• Ask for a contraception appointment “just for birth control” if you feel you don’t need a check-up or Pap smear.

At your appointment, your clinician will talk with you more about birth control pills and write a prescription.

**If you already have a prescription**

If you are currently using hormonal contraception and want to have your prescription renewals managed at Cornell Health, please make an appointment with a clinician before you run out of pills.

Please talk with us if you have any questions about the pill, or any other sexual health issue. We offer phone consultation 24/7 at 607-255-5155.

**Picking up your pills**

Your prescription can be filled at Cornell Health’s pharmacy (Monday – Saturday during business hours). No appointment is needed for pick-up. Be sure to have your next pack ready several days before finishing your current pack.

**Unsure which birth control method is right for you?**

Please make an appointment to speak with a sexual health nurse at Cornell Health. You may schedule an appointment by phone (607-255-5155), online via myCornellHealth, or by visiting Cornell Health during business hours.