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
• markedly impaired liver function or hepatic adenoma
• undiagnosed breast masses or known or suspected carcinoma of the breast
• undiagnosed abnormal genital bleeding
• known or suspected pregnancy
• known or suspected estrogen-dependent tumor
• history of migraines or lipid disorders
• hypertension with resting diastolic BP of 90 or greater over several visits

How to use OCs
( ) First Day: Start your OC pills the first day your normal period begins. This method is effective immediately if used with a normal, on-time period.
( ) Quick Start: Take your first OC pill today if you are certain you could not be pregnant now. Return to take a pregnancy test if your period does not come during the placebo week of the pills. The pills will be effective in 7 days when this start method is used. Swallow one pill at about the same time every day until you finish the package. Associate taking the pill with some regularly scheduled activity such as meals or bedtime. Check your pack each day to be sure you took your pill the day before.

Your menstrual periods
In a monthly pill pack you can expect to get your period sometime in the last row. Bleeding may last a shorter time and may be lighter than before you started pills. The first few months you may have bleeding at other times as well. This is normal and usually stops by the time you have taken three pill packs. Periods may be short and scanty for those taking pills. If you have not missed any pills and you have no signs of pregnancy, then pregnancy is unlikely. If you are worried, however, call Cornell Health at 607-255-5155. Be sure to have a pregnancy test if you do not have bleeding for two months in a row.

If you are taking certain medications
Some drugs you may need to take for medical conditions may decrease the effectiveness of your pills. If you are using drugs such as rifampin, griseofulvin, phenytoin, phenobarbital, topirimate, carbamazepine, antiretroviral drugs, or St. John's Wort, tell your medical clinician. Also, you must inform any other health care providers that you use the pill, especially if you are in a leg cast or scheduled for surgery. If you have any questions, ask. Additional protection (barrier methods or abstinence) will ensure your contraceptive’s effectiveness while taking other medicines. If you experience breakthrough bleeding while taking other medications, it may indicate a decrease in the pill’s effectiveness. Use a back-up method and consult with a health care provider.

Vomiting or diarrhea
If you have vomiting or severe diarrhea within two hours of taking your birth control pill, your body may not absorb it, so you should use a back-up method of birth control for at least 7 days.

Serious side-effects
It is important to be aware of the very rare but potentially serious complications that may arise as the result of pill use (e.g. gall stones, blood clots). The following are important symptoms, not to be ignored:
• severe abdominal pain lasting more than 30 minutes
• severe chest pain or shortness of breath
• increase in frequency or severity of headaches, especially if associated with weakness, numbness, or vision disturbances
• loss of vision, double or blurred vision
• speech problems
• severe pain in the calf or thighs

If you have missed pills
Sometimes mistakes happen and pills are forgotten or packs are started late. However, when pills are taken off-schedule, the risk of getting pregnant increases.
• If you are late taking a pill by 24 hours or fewer, take that pill as soon as you remember. You will have no increase in pregnancy risk.
• If you miss a pill by more than 24 hours or are late starting a new pill pack, take the late or missed pill as soon as possible, and the remaining pills at the usual time.

Emergency Contraception
Emergency Contraception (EC) is birth control used after unprotected sex to help prevent pregnancy. It works by delaying or temporarily stopping ovulation (the release of an egg that can be fertilized by sperm), or by changing the environment of the uterus or cervix so that sperm and egg do not meet. EC is best used right away (or up to five days after sex) if you think your birth control failed, you didn’t use contraception, or vaginal intercourse was unplanned, unintended, or unwanted. There are different forms of EC: two different kinds of pills, and a Copper-T IUD. To learn which EC may be right for you—based on your body mass and on the length of time since unprotected intercourse—visit health.cornell.edu [search: “Emergency Contraception”].

When to stop the OC pill
People occasionally stop taking their OC pills because they are annoyed by side effects. However, most side effects disappear if pills are taken consistently for three cycles. We encourage you to continue the pill for three full cycles because frequent starting and stopping may prolong adjustment to the pill and contribute to the risk of serious side-effects. Contact your medical clinician if you are considering stopping the pill because of side effects. Remember: it is possible to become pregnant as soon as you stop the pill. There are no medical benefits to “taking a break” from the pill (periodically, after a certain number of years, or at a certain age). Consult with your medical clinician before assuming it is necessary to stop the pill.

Getting a prescription
Schedule an appointment via phone (607-255-5155), online via myCornellHealth, or by visiting Cornell Health during business hours.
• 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.