Birth control pills, also known as Oral Contraceptives (OCs), are one of the most effective methods a woman can use 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, 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 and dry 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 women choose to take the pill simply because of its beneficial side-effects:

• maintains regular 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)
• prevents and or treats endometriosis
• decreases the incidence of ovarian cysts, fibrocystic breast syndrome and fibroadenomas of the breast
• 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 at 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 at the same time daily
• may have possible temporary side-effects: small amount of 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 a pill

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 hormone dose. This bleeding does not indicate diminished contraceptive protection unless you have taken pills irregularly (in which case additional contraception is recommended). It is important that 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 clinician or nurse. Most common problems can be relieved by changing to a different pill.

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. Women who use oral contraceptives are strongly urged not to smoke.

Chronic conditions: If you have a chronic medical problem, you will need to 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 get a prescription
Make an appointment at Cornell Health. Pill prescriptions, as well as back-up methods of contraception (e.g., condoms) can be filled at Cornell Health's pharmacy, where the costs are comparable or less than outside pharmacies.

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 women on 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 clinician. You must inform all 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 diarrhea, your body may not absorb the pill, 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.
• If you miss more than one pill, visit health.cornell.edu [search: “Missed Pill”] or call 255-5155 and ask to consult with a nurse.
• If ever you are unsure of what to do, use a back-up contraceptive, keep taking your pills, and call Cornell Health (255-5155) for more information.

Emergency Contraception
Emergency contraception (EC) is a single pill intended to stop pregnancy before it begins. To be most effective, it should be used as soon as possible after unprotected intercourse (no later than five days). Consider EC:
• if you’ve had vaginal intercourse with no method of contraception
• if you’ve missed one or more consecutive pills at the beginning of a pack
• if you missed two or more consecutive pills during the active pill cycle
EC should be taken within 5 days (120 hours) of unprotected vaginal intercourse, the sooner the better (preferably within 72 hours).
The most effective method of EC is the placement of a copper IUD within 5 days of unprotected sex.
For additional information visit health.cornell.edu [search: “EC”].

When to stop the pill
Women occasionally stop their 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. Contact your health care provider 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 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, Pap smear or STI testing.

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.

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.