

*Helping you live  
well to learn well*

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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. The pill provides synthetic estrogen each day to prevent the release of hormones 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
- helps to manage some menstrual-related problems (e.g. can shorten periods; reduce the incidence of iron deficiency anemia; minimize cramps and PMS; provide menstrual regulation)
- 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

Remember that birth control pills:

- do not protect against sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) such as HPV, herpes, Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, and HIV
- must be taken around the same time daily
- may not be effective when used with certain medications
- may require a back-up method (e.g. condom) at initial startup and if you miss two or more pills

Common side-effects (which often disappear 1-3 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.



*Your birth control pills may look different.  
There are many varieties.*

- **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.

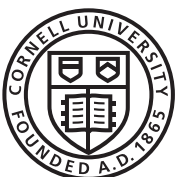
If any of these problems persist after three pill cycles or seem severe, call for an appointment with a medical clinician. Most problems can be relieved by changing to a different pill, or a different contraceptive method.

### 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 health. Most of the time, taking the pill is relatively safe. However, if you have any of the following conditions, check with your medical clinician about your ability to use estrogen-containing oral contraceptives:

- thrombophlebitis, thromboembolic (blood-clotting) disorders, cerebral vascular disease, coronary artery disease / ischemic heart 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 with aura



- hypertension
- systemic lupus erythematosus

## How to use OCs

( ) **First Day:** Start your OC pills the first day your normal period begins. This method is effective immediately for contraception if used with an 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. If you are sexually active during the placebo (4th) week and the pills were taken consistently for the previous 3 weeks, there is no need for backup contraception during the placebo week.

## 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 have questions or concerns, or if you do not have bleeding for two months in a row, call Cornell Health for consultation at 607-255-5155.

## 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, topiramate, 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 medical clinician.

## Vomiting or diarrhea

If you have vomiting within two hours of taking your birth control pill, your body may not absorb it, so you should take another pill immediately. If your vomiting persists, wait until the next day and take two active pills 12 hours apart. If you miss more than two active pills consecutively, plan to use a barrier method (condoms) or abstinence for seven days until your contraception is effective again.

If you have severe diarrhea (6-8 stools in 24-48 hours), you should use a barrier method (condoms) or abstinence for seven days until your contraception is effective again.

## 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
- sudden severe headache or an 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 miss pills

Sometimes pills are forgotten or packs are started late. When pills are taken off-schedule, the risk of getting pregnant increases.

- If you are late taking a pill by fewer than 48 hours, take that pill as soon

as you remember. You will have no increase in pregnancy risk.

- If you miss two or more consecutive active pills in fewer than 48 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](http://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 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: non-prescription pills; prescription pills; and two types of intrauterine device (IUD). To learn which EC is right for you—based on BMI and length of time since unprotected sex—visit [health.cornell.edu/EC](http://health.cornell.edu/EC).

## 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.

## 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 “preventive care 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.