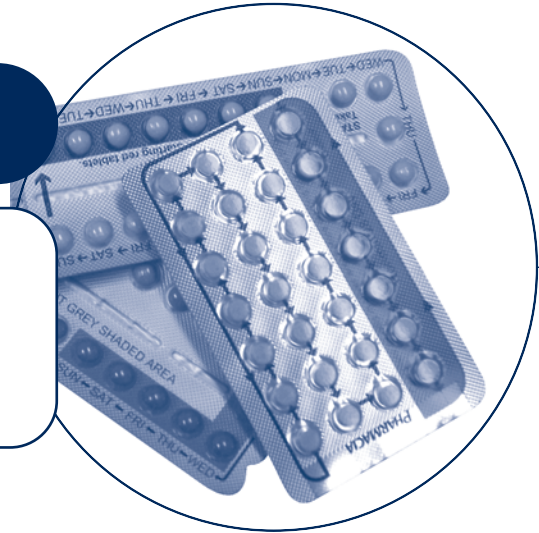


# CONTRACEPTION

## Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill (The Pill)



**The Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill is an oral contraceptive containing hormones. It is taken daily to prevent pregnancy.**

### What is the Pill?

The Pill contains low doses of two hormones – oestrogen and progestogen. These are similar to the hormones naturally produced by the female body.

There are many types of combined pills available. They differ in the level of hormones and the type and level of the progestogen they contain.

### How does the Pill work?

The Pill works by:

- preventing ovulation (egg release from the ovary)
- thickening mucus in the cervix so sperm cannot enter the uterus (womb)
- changing the lining of the uterus, making it unsuitable for pregnancy

### How effective is the Pill?

The Pill is 97-99% effective when taken correctly. This means that if 100 women take the Pill, between one and three of those women could become pregnant in a year. It is less effective than this if not taken according to instructions.

### What are the advantages of the Pill as a method of contraception?

- very effective method of contraception
- fertility returns soon after stopping
- predictable and regular bleeding pattern

### What are the disadvantages of the Pill as a method of contraception?

- easy to forget – needs to be taken on a daily basis
- medical review required each year for prescriptions
- some types of the Pill are expensive
- does not protect against sexually transmitted infections

### What are the possible health benefits of the Pill?

- periods may be lighter, shorter and more regular with less discomfort
- reduced risk of cancer of the ovary and uterus in women who have ever used the Pill
- helps manage heavy periods, painful periods, endometriosis, benign breast problems, recurrent ovarian cysts and premenstrual syndrome
- may improve acne

## What are the possible side effects of taking the Pill?

The Pill has few side effects. Some women may experience:

- nausea
- breast tenderness or enlargement
- mood changes
- breakthrough bleeding
- headaches

These side effects often settle within two or three months of starting the Pill.

Other possible side effects may include:

- skin changes including acne or chloasma (patchy brown skin discolouration of the face)
- missed periods
- change in sexual interest
- weight gain – however studies show that on average, weight gain is not related to the Pill

If you continue to have problems while on one type of Pill discuss it with your doctor, as there may be a more suitable pill for you or you may decide to change to another method of contraception.

## What are the possible serious complications of taking the Pill?

While serious complications are extremely rare in healthy women taking the Pill, it is important to note the following:

- Thrombosis is a rare but very serious complication occurring when blood clots form in major blood vessels. It is important to recognise the warning signs and seek immediate medical help if any of the following are experienced:
  - sudden severe chest pains
  - severe calf pain or swelling in one leg
  - sudden severe headache
  - sudden onset of blurred vision or loss of sight

To reduce the risk of thrombosis in the veins after surgery, women may be advised to stop taking the Pill and use another method of contraception for four weeks before and after a major operation.

- Cancer risk  
Some studies have shown a slightly increased risk of breast cancer in women currently taking the Pill. However a more recent study found no increase in breast cancer. It is important to discuss your individual concerns with your doctor.

## Is the Pill suitable for all women?

Most women can safely take the Pill.

The Pill may be PARTICULARLY SUITABLE for women who:

- prefer an oral method of contraception
- prefer a method that can be stopped easily, without seeing a doctor if contraception is no longer required
- have other conditions that may benefit from taking the Pill – including acne, heavy and/or painful periods, endometriosis, ovarian cysts, premenstrual symptoms

The Pill MAY NOT be suitable for women who:

- have diabetes
- have gall bladder disease
- are significantly overweight
- have a family history of thrombosis or heart attack
- have migraine headaches which worsen when taking the Pill
- have high blood pressure

The Pill IS NOT suitable for women who:

- smoke cigarettes and are over 35 years of age
- have suffered from thrombosis (blood clots in veins)
- have had a stroke or heart attack
- have had certain types of migraine headaches
- have had breast or genital cancer
- have liver disease
- are pregnant or breastfeeding



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### What do I need to know about starting the Pill?

Starting the Pill for the first time requires an assessment by a doctor and a prescription. This allows the doctor to assess your medical history and allows you to ask questions to ensure you feel confident in using the Pill.

There are different types of packaging of pills. Your health professional will explain starting the Pill with you, based on the particular Pill being prescribed for you, as all packages look different. Key points:

- when commencing the first pill packet it is usual to start taking the first pill on the first day of a period
- once you have taken seven hormone 'active' pills in the first packet you will be protected from pregnancy

### What do I need to know about the ongoing use of the Pill?

The Pill needs to be taken at a regular time every day and it is easier to remember if you make it a part of your daily routine.

Australian pill packets contain 28 pills made up of 21 hormone 'active' pills and seven 'inactive' (these are often called the sugar pills).

A monthly bleed occurs during the inactive pills and many women prefer to have a regular period. However if you do not want to have a monthly bleed you can safely take the hormone pills continuously. See your health professional for more information about this.

To renew your pill prescription you will need to see a doctor at least once a year.

### The Pill may not be effective if:

- a pill is late or missed
- vomiting occurs within two to three hours of taking a pill
- you have severe diarrhoea
- medications are taken

Certain medications, including antibiotics, may interfere with the effectiveness of the Pill. Always ask your doctor if you will need to follow the missed pill advice (see below) if you are prescribed any additional medication. You cannot rely on the Pill for prevention of pregnancy while on the medication and then for the next 7 days of active hormone pills.

Some non-prescribed medications, such as St Johns wort (or hypericum), can also make the Pill less effective. Always check with the pharmacist.

If you are concerned about any of the above situations, check with your doctor or health professional.

### What should I do if I am late in taking the Pill or miss a pill?

If you are 24 hours or more late for any pills consult the missed pill section on the back page of this factsheet. If you aren't certain what to do, seek further advice as soon as possible, particularly if you think you may need Emergency Contraception.

### Do I need Emergency Contraception if I have missed a pill?

Emergency Contraception may be required if you miss pills and sexual activity occurs without a condom being used. Emergency Contraception should particularly be considered for pills missed in the first week of the cycle, ie, the first 7 hormone pills taken after the 7 day break on the sugar pills.

Emergency Contraception is most effective when taken within 24 hours, but may be taken up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sexual intercourse. It is available without a prescription from pharmacies, general practitioners (GP's), Sexual Health or Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) clinics. See FPQ's Emergency Contraception factsheet.

# CONTRACEPTION

## TIPS FOR PILL TAKERS

Choose a time of day for pill taking that is easy to remember. You can link it to something else you do daily, like brushing your teeth.

If you have any side effects, including irregular bleeding, keep taking the Pill and see your health practitioner. Stopping the Pill mid cycle may cause more bleeding and increase your risk of pregnancy.

Never have more than the 7 day break from hormone pills. Don't be late in starting hormone pills after 7 days of inactive pills.

To make sure you're protected against both pregnancy and STIs, use the Pill + condom for best protection.

### What should I do if I am sick?

If you vomit within two to three hours of taking the Pill it may not be effective. Take another pill as soon as you can. Severe diarrhoea may also interfere with the Pill's effectiveness. Follow the missed pill advice as outlined.

### Where is the Pill available?

The Pill is available on prescription and can be obtained from your local GP or FPQ clinic.

## MISSED A PILL? HOW LATE ARE YOU?

### Less than 24 hours?

That is, less than 48 hours since you took an active pill.

Take the late pill now and further pills as usual. That's all. You are still protected from pregnancy.

### More than 24 hours?

That is, more than 48 hours since you took an active pill.

### Where in the pill cycle have you missed pill(s)?

#### Any of the first 7 active hormone pills after the week of inactive (sugar) pills?

Take the most recently missed pill now. Take further pills as usual (even if this means 2 pills in a day). You will not be protected from pregnancy until you've taken 7 active pills in a row. Use condoms or no sex until you have taken 7 consecutive active pills. If you've had unprotected sex in the last 5 days, Emergency Contraception is recommended.

#### Any of the middle 7 active hormone pills

Take the most recently missed pill now. Take further pills as usual (even if this means 2 pills in a day). You will not be protected from pregnancy until you've taken 7 active pills in a row. Use condoms or no sex until you have taken 7 consecutive active pills.

#### Last 7 days of hormone pills before the week of inactive (sugar) pills?

Take the most recently missed pill now. Take further pills as usual (even if this means 2 pills in a day). You will not be protected from pregnancy until you've taken 7 active pills in a row. Use condoms or no sex until you have taken 7 consecutive active pills. AND skip inactive (sugar) pills in this pack. Go straight onto first hormone pills in next pack.

#### Any of the inactive (sugar) pills?

No precautions required. You are still protected from pregnancy as long as you haven't missed any active hormone pills.

#### Disclaimer

Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) has taken every care to ensure that the information contained in this publication is accurate and up-to-date at the time of being published. As information and knowledge is constantly changing, readers are strongly advised to confirm that the information complies with present research, legislation and policy guidelines. FPQ accepts no responsibility for difficulties that may arise as a result of an individual acting on the advice and recommendations it contains.

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