

*Take your pill
at the same
every day.
It is the day-
to-day action
of the pill
that provides
protection.*

Birth Control Pills

What Is the Birth Control Pill?

The birth control pill is a form of oral (taken by mouth) contraception. It is a man-made version of hormones that are found naturally in your body. This medicine, when taken properly, can be an effective way to prevent pregnancy.

How Are They Packaged?

Birth control pills can be dispensed in packs of 21, 28 or 91 pills. It is important to keep the pills in the original container, because it will help you keep track of your dosage schedule. Be sure to take your pills in the order they appear in the container.

What Are the Differences between 21, 28 and 91-Day Packs?

Both the 21-day pack and the 28-day pack contain 21 active pills. An active pill contains the man-made version of hormones found in your body. The only difference between the two is the 28-day pack contains 7 additional pills, which are inactive pills made out of sugar.

The 91-day pack contains 84 “active” pills and 7 “inactive” pills. You will only have your period every 3 months with the 91-day pack, whereas you will have your period every month with the other two.

How Does the Birth Control Pill Work?

The birth control pill prevents your ovaries from releasing eggs by changing your hormone levels. When taking birth control pills, your menstrual cycle continues. However, you may notice less menstrual bleeding and have a shorter period.

How Effective Is the Birth Control Pill?

The “pill” can be a very good form of birth control. If used correctly (taking every dose as directed at the same time each day), fewer than one out of every 100 women will become pregnant in a year.

Will the Birth Control Pill Prevent Sexually Transmitted Diseases?

The birth control pill **does not** protect you from the HIV virus or any other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Only abstinence or a condom can provide some protection against STDs.

How Do I Take the Birth Control Pill?

Never let your tablet supply run out. Take your pill at the same time every day. It is the day-to-day action of the pill that provides protection, not just taking a single pill.

Birth control pills must be taken correctly in order for them to work.

What if I Am Taking Other Medications?

There are some medications such as antibiotics, antiretrovirals and tranquilizers that can reduce the actions of the birth control pill. For this reason, you should tell your prescriber about all the medicines you are taking before starting the birth control pill. If you are already on the pill, you need to tell your doctor or dentist you are taking the pill whenever they prescribe any other medicines.

Who Should Not Take the Pill?

You should not take the pill if you are pregnant or have had:

- Blood clots
- Swelling in the veins
- Liver disease
- Heart disease
- Unexplained vaginal bleeding
- Cancer of the breast, uterus or liver

What Are the Side-Effects of the Birth Control Pill?

Many people have no side-effects while on the pill. However, there is still the possibility they may occur, and some are more likely to occur than others.

Most Common:

- Nausea
- Weight gain (partially due to water retention)
- Breast fullness or tenderness
- Bloating

Moderate:

- Headache
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Increased sex drive

Uncommon:

- Increase in blood pressure
- Increase in blood sugar
- Bruising more easily
- Depression
- Dizziness
- Anxiety
- Rash
- Increase in cholesterol (triglycerides and LDL)
- Stomach upset
- Intolerance to wearing contact lenses

Many of these side effects, such as nausea and headache, will disappear as your body adjusts to the pill. However, if any of the above side effects become persistent, especially the tendency to bruise more easily or if intolerance to contact lenses occurs, contact your doctor. In addition, if any of these effects last longer than 2 or 3 months after starting the pill, you should call your doctor or your clinic. Taking each dose with food may help prevent stomach upset. You may miss a period when your body is initially adjusting to the pill. If you miss two periods in a row, call your doctor or clinic.

If you notice any of the following symptoms while taking the pill, notify your doctor or clinic **right away:**

- Severe pain in the chest or stomach
- Pain, swelling and/or redness of the leg(s)
- Severe headache or visual changes
- Lumps in the breast or abdomen
- Severe depression
- Tingling or weakness on one side of the body
- Shortness of breath

To reduce serious side-effects affecting the heart and blood circulation, do not smoke cigarettes while using the birth control pill. Women who are 35 or older and smoke 15 or more cigarettes per day should consider another method of birth control due to the increased chance of developing a blood clot. Northwestern Memorial's Wellness Institute offers individual and group smoking cessation programs. To learn more about these programs, call 312-926-WELL (9355).

When Do I Take the Pill?

In general, there are 2 different ways you can begin taking birth control pills:

Sunday Starters

Begin taking your pills on the first Sunday after the beginning of your period, even if you are still bleeding. If your period begins on a Sunday, take your first pill on that day. **Make sure you use another method of birth control for at least the first 7 days you are taking these pills.**

First Day Starters

Begin taking your pills on the first day of your period. If you begin taking your pills on the first day, you avoid the risk of early ovulation and the need to use another form of birth control.

Please Note:

Some manufacturers and doctors recommend using another form of birth control. If you have any questions on this, please discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist first.

What if I Forget to Take a Pill?

Sunday Starters

If you miss one pill, take your pill as soon as you remember. If you don't remember until the next day, take it along with the pill for that day. Alternative forms of birth control are not needed.

If you miss two pills in a row during week 1 or week 2 of your pack, take two pills on the day you remember and take two pills the following day. Then, begin taking your pills on your regular schedule again. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for at least the next 7 days to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

If you miss two pills in a row during week 3 of your pack, take 1 pill every day until Sunday. Start a new pack on Sunday. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for at least the next 7 days to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

If you miss three or more pills in a row during the first 3 weeks of your pack, take one pill every day until Sunday. Start a new pack on Sunday. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for the rest of your pack and for the next 7 days following the beginning of a new pack to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

First Day Starters

If you miss one pill, take your pill as soon as you remember. If you don't remember until the next day, take it along with the pill for that day. Alternative forms of birth control are not needed.

If you miss two pills in a row during week 1 or week 2 of your pack, take two pills on the day you remember and take two pills the following day. Then begin taking your pills on your regular schedule again. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for at least the next 7 days to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

If you miss two pills in a row during week 3 of your pack, discard the rest of your pack and start a brand new pack that same day. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for the rest of your new pack to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

If you miss three or more pills in a row during the first 3 weeks of your pack, discard the rest of your pack and start a brand new pack that same day. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for at least the next 7 days to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

91-day pack

If you miss one pill for the first 84 days of the schedule, take it as soon as you remember. If you don't remember until the next day, take it along with the pill for that day. Alternative forms of birth control are not needed.

If you miss 2 pills in a row, take 2 pills on the day you remember and 2 pills the next day. Then, continue with your regular schedule. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for at least the next 7 days after you restart your pills to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

If you miss 3 pills in a row, throw away the pills that you missed. Restart by taking your pill for the actual day it is. You may experience bleeding during the week following the missed pills. **You must use a back-up method of birth control for at least the next 7 days after you restart your pills to avoid the chance of becoming pregnant during that month.**

Please be sure to read the patient information sheet that comes with your birth control pills and to discuss the directions with your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

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