

THE CONTRACEPTIVE PILL

If you're having sex and you don't want to get pregnant, you need to use contraception. Contraception is also called birth control or family planning.

Every month your ovaries produce an egg. The semen that is released when a man ejaculates contains millions of sperm. It takes only one of these sperm to fertilise one of your eggs to begin a pregnancy. Using contraception reduces your risk of getting pregnant when you have sex.

What are contraceptive pills?

Contraceptive pills contain hormones that help prevent pregnancy by:

- » stopping eggs being released from your ovaries
- » thickening the mucus in your cervix (entrance to your uterus), which makes it difficult for sperm to enter your uterus and fertilise an egg.

A contraceptive pill must be swallowed every day. For most effective use, it is best to take each pill at the same time every day.

There are two main types of oral contraceptive pills:

- » combined oral contraceptive pill (COC), which contains two hormones. Packs contain both active and inactive (sugar) pills
- » progestogen-only pill (mini pill or POP). Packs contain only active pills.

The combined oral contraceptive pill (COC)

If you are taking the COC, remember:

- » Take each pill at the same time every day, or as close to it as possible.
- » You are immediately protected from pregnancy if you start taking the pill up to, and including, the fifth day of your period.
- » If you start taking the pill at any other day in your cycle you will NOT be protected against pregnancy until you have taken seven active pills from your first packet.

If you forget to take a pill, take one as soon as you remember. Take the next pill at the usual time the next day. Keep taking the pill as normal, but use another form of contraception (like condoms) for the next seven days.

BUT if these seven days run into the seven inactive (sugar) pills, start taking the active pills in the next packet. If you are not sure which pills are inactive, ask your doctor or local pharmacist.

Some types of the Pill are effective from the first day they are taken. Ask your health practitioner or local pharmacist which type you are using.

How effective is the COC?

When the COC is taken every day at the same time, less than one woman out of a 100 using it will get pregnant. You are more likely to get pregnant if you take it irregularly, or have severe diarrhoea and vomiting, or if you are taking other medicine that affects pill absorption.

You can become pregnant if you are more than 24 hours late taking it.

What are the advantages of taking the COC?

- » A regular period with reduced blood loss.
- » Acne often improves.
- » Milder or no period pain or discomfort.

What are the disadvantages of taking the COC?

- » Tender breasts, nausea (feeling sick) and bleeding in the middle of your cycle mainly in the first few months of taking the Pill.
- » The Pill may cause some weight gain, mood changes or loss of libido (interest in sex) in some women.
- » Rare health problems.
- » The COC will not protect you against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

What are the health risks?

Serious health problems with the Pill are rare. Smoking increases the risk of harmful effects. The Pill is not suitable for women with the following conditions:

- » certain types of migraine
- » history of blood clotting
- » liver problems
- » unusual vaginal bleeding.

The progestogen-only pill (POP)

If you are taking the POP remember:

- » You must take it daily without a break (even when you have your period) AND at the same time every day. There are no inactive (sugar) pills in a POP pack.
- » It starts working immediately if you start on the first five days of your period. If you start at any other time you will NOT be protected until you have taken it for three consecutive days.
- » If you are more than three hours late taking the POP, you must use other contraception (e.g. condoms) until you have taken it for three consecutive days. If you have unprotected sex after missing a pill and don't want to become pregnant you should take emergency contraception as soon as possible.

What are the advantages of taking the POP?

- » It can be used by women who cannot take the oestrogen hormone.
- » It is safe to use when you are breastfeeding.
- » It may reduce period pain and discomfort.

What are the disadvantages of taking the POP?

- » You must remember to take it at the same time every day.
- » It may cause some side effects, including irregular bleeding, mood changes, headaches and acne.

How effective is the POP?

When the POP is taken every day and at the same time, less than one woman out of a 100 using it will get pregnant. It will work straight away if you start taking it on day one of your menstrual cycle (period). If you start on any other day of your cycle, you will need to use another form of contraception (like condoms) for five days when first taking the POP.

If you have vomiting or severe diarrhoea the POP might not be absorbed by your body. If you are concerned seek medical advice.

Did you know?

- » You have the right to access contraception and control your fertility.
- » You can choose to use contraception that is temporary and reversible.
- » There are methods of contraception that do not have to involve your partner.
- » Some contraception is available relatively cheaply from some providers.
- » Most women who use contraception have little trouble with side effects.

A condom is always a good idea

No matter what contraception you choose, using a condom is the only way to protect yourself against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

One of the most common STIs in Australia is chlamydia. Chlamydia can lead to infertility if left untreated. Using a condom every time you have sex is your best protection against HIV/AIDS and other STIs. **Other contraception will not protect you against sexually transmitted infections.**

The male condom

The male condom is a fine rubber or synthetic sheath that is worn on an erect (stiff) penis. It collects the sperm and stops them entering the vagina and uterus (where a baby grows).

You must use a new condom every time you have sex and take care to put it on and take it off correctly. Condoms are for single use only and can be bought at pharmacies (chemists) and some supermarkets.

Where to get more information

- » Your local doctor (GP)
- » Your local pharmacist
- » Nurse on Call – 1300 60 60 24
- » Family Planning Victoria
Tel: 03 9257 0100 or 1800 013 952 (freecall)
Web: www.fpv.org.au
- » Women's Welcome Centre (Victoria only)
Royal Women's Hospital
Tel: (03) 8345 3037 or 1800 442 007 (rural callers)
Email: wwcadmin@thewomens.org.au
- » Women's Medicines Information Service
Tel: (03) 8345 3190
Email: drug.information@thewomens.org.au

Related fact sheets

- » Contraception – Your Choices
- » Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC)
- » Emergency Contraception