

ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE (THE PILL) FACT SHEET

Effectiveness and Safety

The birth control pill is the most popular and one of the most effective methods of reversible birth control available. It has been available for over 30 years and has been thoroughly studied for its safety and effectiveness. Oral contraceptives are 92-99.7% effective. Pills are very safe for most women. In the United States, it is safer to use pills than to deliver a baby, unless a woman is over 35 years of age and smokes more than 15 cigarettes a day.

How the Pill Works:

Most oral contraceptives contain synthetic versions of two substances your body produces naturally: estrogen and progesterone. These substances are female hormones, and they regulate your menstrual cycle. The hormones in birth control pills prevent pregnancy mainly by preventing the ovary from releasing an egg. The Pill also acts in other ways to prevent pregnancy, such as thickening the cervical mucus so that sperm have difficulty getting through the cervix and therefore cannot fertilize the egg.

Non-contraceptive Health Benefits of the Pill:

In addition to their contraceptive benefits, combination oral contraceptives offer many potential noncontraceptive benefits including the following:

- Menstrual cycles may become more regular
- Blood flow during menstruation may be lighter, and less iron may be lost. Therefore, anemia due to iron deficiency is less likely to occur.
- Pain or other symptoms during menstruation may be encountered less frequently.
- Ovarian cysts may occur less frequently.
- Ectopic (tubal) pregnancy may occur less frequently.
- Noncancerous cysts or lumps in the breast may occur less frequently.
- Acute pelvic inflammatory disease may occur less frequently.
- Oral contraceptive use may provide some protection against developing two forms of cancer: cancer of the ovaries and cancer of the lining of the uterus.
- Improvement in acne.
- Decreased pain at time of ovulation.

Who can use the Pill?

Because the Pill is effective and easy to use, most women who want a reversible form of birth control choose it. If you prefer a birth control method that is easy, convenient, and does not interfere with spontaneous sex, the Pill might be a good choice for you.

Who should *not* use the Pill?

Cigarette smoking increases the risk of serious adverse effects on the heart and blood vessels from oral contraceptive use. This risk increases with age and with heavy cigarette smoking (15 or more cigarettes per day) and is quite marked in women over 35 years of age. Women who use oral contraceptives should not smoke.

While the majority of women can and do use the Pill safely, some women should not use the Pill. You should also not use the Pill if you have had any of the following conditions:

- heart attack or stroke
- blood clots in the veins of your legs, lungs (pulmonary embolism), or eyes
- known or suspected breast cancer or cancer of the lining of the uterus, cervix or vagina
- liver tumor (benign or cancerous)

Or, if you have any of the following:

- chest pain (angina pectoris)

- unexplained vaginal bleeding (until a diagnosis is reached by your health care provider)
- yellowing of the whites of the eyes or of the skin (jaundice) during pregnancy or during previous use of the Pill
- known or suspected pregnancy

Tell your health care provider if you have ever had any of these conditions. He or she can recommend another method of birth control.

Possible problems with the Pill: Common side effects

There are also potential risks and side effects associated with the Pill. The most common problems are nausea and vomiting, which may be alleviated by taking the Pill with food or at bedtime. Your breasts may become tender or a little larger. Very light vaginal bleeding (spotting) may occur between periods. These side effects are more likely to happen during the first few cycles of Pill use. However, if these problems persist, they can sometimes be relieved if your health care provider switches you to another kind of Pill.

Other possible side effects are missed periods, weight gain or weight loss, headache, and depression. Some women who wear contact lenses find that their lenses no longer fit or that they are uncomfortable.

Possible problems with the Pill: More serious side effects

In addition, some women taking the Pill have experienced serious problems. **Although these problems are rare**, they may cause serious disability or death and you should be aware of them.

The serious side effects of the Pill occur very infrequently, especially if you are in good health and do not smoke. However, you should know that the following medical conditions have been associated with or made worse by the Pill:

1. Blood clots in the legs (thrombophlebitis) or blood clots in the lungs (pulmonary embolism), stoppage or rupture of blood vessel in the brain (stroke), blockage of blood vessels in the heart (heart attack and angina pectoris) and, rarely, blood clots in blood vessels of the eye (which may cause blindness). As mentioned previously, smoking while using oral contraceptives increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes and increases the chance of developing and dying from heart disease.
2. Gallbladder disease, although this risk may be related to oral contraceptives containing high doses of estrogens.
3. Liver tumors, which may rupture and cause severe bleeding.
4. High blood pressure, although blood pressure usually returns to normal when Pill use is stopped.

The symptoms associated with these serious side effects are discussed in the detailed leaflet given to you with your supply of pills. If you experience any of these more serious side effects, immediately contact your health care provider. The warning signs (ACHES) for the more serious side effects include the following:

- **Abdominal pain (severe)**
- **Chest pain (severe)** or shortness of breath
- **Headaches (severe)**
- **Eye problems:** blurred vision, flashing lights, blindness
- **Severe leg pain (calf or thigh)**

In addition, drugs such as rifampin, as well as some anticonvulsants and some antibiotics, may decrease oral contraceptive effectiveness. You should advise your health care provider or pharmacist that you are using the Pill if they recommend using these medications.