



Cascade Women's Health
PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS

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ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES

There are a few important things that you need to be aware of while you are taking birth control pills. Please read this sheet carefully and keep it handy to answer questions.

Unpleasant side effects of oral contraceptives are experienced by only a small percentage of women. Because the contents of these pills resemble the hormones of pregnancy, side effects may mimic symptoms experienced early in pregnancy. There may be slight water retention, tender breasts, or occasional nausea, although all these are rare with low dose pills and usually disappear within the first three months.

Smokers and women with high blood pressure or a history of abnormal blood clotting have a higher risk of serious complications. Your doctor or nurse practitioner will review your history before prescribing the pill. Unusual swelling or pain in the leg; yellowing of the skin or eyes; pain in the abdomen, chest or arm; shortness of breath; severe headaches; severe depression; visual symptoms such as blurred or double vision should be reported to us immediately.

The most common side effect is spotting or "breakthrough bleeding." Your body is adjusting to the pill and the spotting should stop within three months. This does NOT mean the pill is not working. Continue taking the pill as directed. Light to moderate vaginal bleeding early in pill use is annoying but is in no way a serious health hazard.

Desirable effects of oral contraceptives include decreased menstrual flow during each period, decreased cramping, and predictable menstrual cycles. Recent studies show lowered rates of uterine and ovarian cancer, endometriosis and benign cysts in birth control users.

No proof exists at present that oral contraceptives can cause cancer in humans. However, this potential continues to be studied based on observations that large doses of sex hormones have produced cancer in some experimental doses of female sex hormones have produced cancer in some experimental animals.

Ovulation may be delayed after birth control use and fertility may return in days or months upon discontinuation. However, this medication does not adversely affect your fertility.

Oral contraceptives are packaged in sets of 21 or 28 tablets. Taken correctly, these prevent ovulation and stimulate a menstrual period. There are several ways to begin pills and your physician or nurse practitioner may advise you to take the first pill as soon as your period begins or on a Sunday-start schedule. On a Sunday-start schedule the first pill is taken on the Sunday after the first day of bleeding. Whether or not you are still bleeding, start your pills as directed.

21-day pills – Take pills for three weeks and stay off the pills for one week. You need to count the seven days in order to begin the next pack.

28-day pills --When your last pill is taken, start the first pill of the next pack on the next day. There is never a day when you do not take a pill.

In order to avoid nausea, some women prefer to take their pills at night. **It is important that you take the pill as soon as you remember you have forgotten one.** If you miss taking a pill for two days or more, take the missed pills 10-12 hours apart the next day, and use some other form of birth control until you have finished the package of pills. Late or missed pills do decrease effectiveness and increase the chances of breakthrough bleeding.

It is not uncommon to miss a period when taking the pill. If you miss one menstrual period and are following your dose schedule, continue taking the pill as directed. If your period doesn't start within 60 days, call us even though you think you have followed the prescribed schedule. If you seriously think you might be pregnant, don't wait. Call the office for a pregnancy test but continue pills until the results are back. It is always best to discuss it with us before you stop the pill.

The pill will not protect persons of either sex from sexually transmitted infections, although women who are taking birth control pills have a lowered incidence of severe pelvic infections. If you are at risk for a STD's, use a condom for additional protection.

Remember that oral contraceptives are a medication. If you should see another physician for any reason, tell her/him that you are taking the pill.

Please feel free to call us if you have any questions.