

## UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**THE BIRTH CONTROL PILL**

The birth control pill, also known as the oral contraceptive pill, is available in a variety of formulations. This handout focuses on combined contraceptive pills that contain both estrogen and progestin. From this point on, we will refer to these combined oral contraceptives as “The Pill”.

Please refer to the fact sheet [“Guide to Hormonal Contraceptives”](#) for information about progestin-only pills and other birth control methods, such as the NuvaRing, Ortho Evra Patch, Depo Provera injection, Nexplanon implant, and intra-uterine devices (IUDs).

**HOW DOES THE PILL WORK?**

The Pill is taken by mouth once a day. It contains a combination of estrogen and progestin hormones which prevent pregnancy by:

- Preventing ovulation (so that your ovaries don't release eggs that can be fertilized by sperm).
- Thickening cervical mucus (to prevent sperm from entering the uterus).
- Altering the lining of the uterus (so that it's harder for a fertilized egg to attach and grow).

**HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE PILL?**

The Pill is a very effective form of contraception when it is taken correctly.

- Less than 1% of women who take their pills once a day as prescribed will get pregnant each year.
- About 7% of women who sometimes forget to take their pills will get pregnant each year.

The Pill may be less effective if you are:

- Overweight. A review of studies suggests that obese women are at higher risk of pregnancy if they forget to take the Pill (imperfect use). Therefore, it is especially important for women who are overweight to take the Pill around the same time every day. The most effective forms of birth control recommended for obese women are IUDs and Nexplanon.
- Taking certain medications, such as some anti-seizure medications, Rifampin (a tuberculosis medication), and St. John's Wort (an herbal supplement taken for depression).

**Note:** Most antibiotics (eg. Penicillin, Keflex, etc.) do not decrease the effectiveness of the Pill.

**DO I NEED TO GET A PAP SMEAR BEFORE STARTING THE PILL?**

No, you can start birth control without having a Pap smear. However, it is important to get regular Pap smears beginning at age 21 to screen for cervical cancer.

**HOW MUCH DOES THE PILL COST?**

- Co-pays through health insurance are usually affordable and vary from carrier to carrier.
- For students who are uninsured or do not wish to use their health insurance, affordable options are available. Student Health carries a wide variety of generic birth control pills for \$15/month. Walmart offers a limited variety of birth control pills for \$9/month. The [GoodRx](#) website or app also offers competitive pricing for prescriptions, even for patients with health insurance.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TAKING THE PILL?**

Taking the Pill is an easy and safe way to prevent pregnancy. Additional benefits of the Pill can include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Improved cycle control.</li> <li>▪ Decreased menstrual cramps and bleeding.</li> <li>▪ Decreased PMS symptoms.</li> <li>▪ Prevention of menstrual migraines.</li> <li>▪ Decreased symptoms from fibrocystic breasts.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Decreased symptoms from fibroids and endometriosis.</li> <li>▪ Decreased acne and excessive hair growth.</li> <li>▪ Protection against ovarian, uterine, and colon cancers.</li> </ul> |
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**CAN THE PILL CAUSE SERIOUS SIDE EFFECTS?**

The Pill is a safe form of birth control for most healthy, non-smoking women. When the Pill was first introduced in the 1960s, it contained high doses of estrogen and progestin that led to an increased risk of cardiovascular complications, such as hypertension, heart attack, stroke, and life-threatening blood clots. Birth control pills now contain much lower hormone doses, and serious side effects are uncommon.

- Hypertension can develop or worsen in some women after starting the Pill. For this reason, your blood pressure is always checked before starting the Pill and periodically while taking the Pill.

- Life-threatening blood clots are rare in women on the Pill but can occur deep in the arms, legs, and lungs. The estrogen component appears to be responsible for activating blood-clotting mechanisms. Therefore, women with a history of blood clots or a clotting disorder should not be on birth control containing estrogen. However, for the average non-smoking healthy female, the risk of developing a life-threatening blood clot is very low. In fact, patients have a higher risk of developing a blood clot during pregnancy than while taking the Pill.

**Note:** Studies have shown a 2-fold increase in the risk of blood clots with pills that contain a specific progestin called drospirenone. These pills include Yaz (Gianvi, Loryna, Vestura) and Yasmin (Ocella, Syeda, Zarah). Talk to your healthcare provider for more information.

**You should not be on the Pill if you:**

- Are pregnant or breastfeeding.
- Are age 35 or older and smoke 15 or more cigarettes a day.
- Have migraine headaches with aura, such as changes in vision (eg. blurred vision, temporary loss of vision, flashing lights, zigzag lines), difficulty speaking, difficulty moving your arms or legs, and other neurologic disturbances.
- Have a history of venous thromboembolism (life-threatening blood clots deep in the limbs or lungs), a blood clotting disorder, or lupus.
- Are planning surgery that will keep you from walking for a week or more.
- Have high blood pressure that is not well-controlled.
- Have serious problems with your heart or blood vessels, including heart attack, heart disease from blocked arteries, and stroke.
- Have uncontrolled diabetes or diabetes for more than 20 years.
- Have, or ever had, breast cancer.
- Have any unusual vaginal bleeding.
- Have jaundice or a serious liver disorder.

**Seek medical help immediately if you have:**

- Severe or crushing chest pain or sudden shortness of breath (which may indicate a blood clot in the heart or lungs).
- Severe pain in the arms or legs with redness, swelling, or warmth (which may indicate a blood clot in the arm or leg).
- Sudden severe headache with visual disturbance or difficulty with speech (which may indicate a blood clot in the brain).
- Severe abdominal pain.

**WHAT ARE OTHER SIDE EFFECTS OF THE PILL?**

Most patients experience no side effects on the Pill. If side effects do occur, they usually resolve after your body becomes adjusted to the hormones. This may take up to 3 months.

- If you are experiencing side effects that are minor, try to stick with your birth control for a few months before switching to a different medication.
- If side effects are so severe that they are affecting your quality of life, talk to your medical provider sooner.

**Common side effects may include:**

- Breakthrough bleeding or spotting between periods (more common on low-dose pills; this side effect does not decrease the effectiveness of the Pill).
- Breast tenderness and/or enlargement.
- Nausea (taking the Pill at bedtime or with food may help).
- Moodiness or irritability.
- Headache (usually improves without having to stop the Pill).
- Weight gain (studies suggest that the Pill does not play a significant role in weight gain; if weight gain does occur, it is typically around 1 lb).

**WHEN DOES MY PERIOD COME BACK AFTER STOPPING THE PILL?**

- If you had regular periods before starting the Pill, you will probably resume your periods within 3 months of stopping the Pill.
- Some women have irregular periods or no periods for up to 6 months after stopping the Pill. This is more common in women who had irregular periods before starting the Pill.

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:** [www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org), [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org)

## VCU Fact Sheet: HOW TO TAKE THE PILL

STARTING THE PILL	
<b>Back-up Birth Control</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <u>You will need back-up birth control (condoms, etc.) during the first 7 days after starting the Pill because it is not protecting you from pregnancy yet. The only exception is if you start the Pill on the first day of your period.</u></li> <li>▪ The Pill does not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs), so you should still use a condom.</li> <li>▪ It's also important to use a condom (or other back-up) in case you:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Run out of your prescription.</li> <li>- Forget to take 2 or more pills in a row.</li> <li>- Have significant vomiting or diarrhea.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>First Day Start</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Start the Pill on the first day of your period.</li> <li>▪ You do not need back-up contraception for pregnancy prevention.</li> </ul>
<b>Sunday Start</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Start the Pill on the first Sunday after your period begins. If your period begins on a Sunday, start the Pill that day.</li> <li>▪ You must use back-up birth control for the next 7 days (unless Sunday is the first day of your period).</li> </ul>
<b>Start Today</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If you are certain that you are not pregnant and if you have not had any unprotected sex since your last period, you can start the Pill today.</li> <li>▪ Disregard any spotting or bleeding you may have during the first month.</li> <li>▪ You must use back-up birth control for the next 7 days.</li> </ul>

TAKING THE PILL	
<b>Your Pill Pack</b>	<p>Most pill packs contain 28 pills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The first 3 weeks (or more) of your pill pack will contain the hormones estrogen and progestin. These are your "active pills".</li> <li>▪ The 4<sup>th</sup> or last week of your pill pack contains no hormones. These are called "placebo pills" or "sugar pills". They are usually a different color.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A few days into your 4<sup>th</sup> (or placebo) week, you will have your period.</li> <li>- You are still protected from pregnancy during the placebo week even though you are taking pills without hormones in them.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Take one pill every day.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Take your pill at the same time each day (within 2 hours of your normal time).</li> <li>▪ Begin a new pack immediately after finishing your current pack.</li> <li>▪ Never go more than 7 days without taking active pills (pills containing hormones). If you start the next pack late, you will need back-up birth control for the next 7 days.</li> </ul>
<b>What if I want to skip a menstrual cycle?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Monophasic pill packs (where the dose of active pills does not change week to week) can be taken continuously to prevent a period. Avoid trying this method until your periods have been regular on the Pill for a few months. Otherwise you are likely to experience persistent irregular bleeding.</li> <li>▪ To skip a period, you will need to take an active pill every day. This means that after finishing the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of the pill pack, you will start a new pack immediately (instead of taking the placebo pills).</li> <li>▪ It is normal to have some spotting during the first 6 months with this method.</li> <li>▪ If you prefer this method, we recommend having a period every 3 months.</li> </ul>

If YOU MISS...	
<b>One active pill,</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Take it as soon as you remember. Take the next pill at your regular time. This means you may take 2 pills in one day (or 2 pills at the same time).</li> <li>▪ Back-up birth control is not needed for pregnancy prevention.</li> </ul>
<b>Two active pills In a row during Week 1 or Week 2,</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Take 2 pills on the day you remember and 2 pills the next day. Then take 1 pill a day for the remainder of the pack.</li> <li>▪ You must use back-up birth control for the next 7 days to prevent pregnancy.</li> </ul>
<b>Two active pills In a row during Week 3 OR Three active pills In a row at any time,</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Throw out the rest of the pack, and start a new pack that day.</li> <li>▪ You will need back-up birth control for the next 7 days.</li> <li>▪ You may not have your period this month, but this is expected. If you are worried about pregnancy, continue your pills but come into Student Health for a free pregnancy test.</li> </ul>
<b>Any placebo pills In Week 4,</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Throw away the ones you missed, and keep taking one pill each day until the pill pack is empty.</li> <li>▪ You do not need to use a back-up method of birth control.</li> </ul>
<b>Note:</b> You can also refer to the package insert that came with your pill pack for directions about missed pills.	