

BIRTH CONTROL PILLS

ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES

What is the Pill?

Birth control pills are oral contraceptives containing synthetic hormones, estrogen and progesterone. There is also a progesterone-only pill for those who cannot tolerate estrogen.

How does it work?

The birth control pill prevents pregnancy by suppressing ovulation and inhibiting sperm travel. It also alters the uterine lining, making implantation less likely.

How effective is the Pill?

When used consistently and correctly, the failure rate is less than 1%. But with missed pills, ovulation may occur. Taking pills for a few days, or occasionally, is not effective.

What are some benefits of using BCPs?

- >fewer menstrual cramps, fewer days of bleeding
- >more regular periods, less mid-cycle pain
- >less anxiety and depression prior to period
- >less fibrocystic breast condition
- >reduces your risk of ovarian and uterine cancer
- >acne may clear up
- >reduced risk of ectopic pregnancy
- >less iron deficiency anemia

What about side effects?

Minor side effects are not serious or life threatening. They usually disappear after 2-3 cycles on the pill. If they become too uncomfortable or last longer than 3 cycles, return to the SHC for a visit. A different pill may relieve the symptoms.

- weight gain or loss of 3-5 pounds
- nausea, breast tenderness
- change in skin pigmentation
- spotting or breakthrough bleeding
- mood changes/depression/changes in sex drive
- missed periods
- vaginal discharge, or yeast infections

What are the risks of taking the pill?

In women under age 50, potential risks associated with pregnancy and abortion generally outweigh Pill risks. In fact, the Pill is now approved for women through menopause, as it helps relieve some of the symptoms associated with menopause, and serves to protect against several types of cancer. Major risks associated with the pill *for certain users* are described below and on the reverse:

-cardiovascular complications: Heart attacks and strokes occur more in pill users than non-users. But, cardiovascular side effects are extremely rare, occurring in a small percentage of users, mainly:

- smokers
- over age 45
- with high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, or family histories of heart or vascular disease
- with family histories of diabetes or heart attack under age 50 (esp. female)

-hypertension: 1% of BCP users get this. It usually subsides after stopping the pill.

-liver problems: Pill users have a small but increased risk of benign liver tumors [3-4 per 100,000], most often after being on the pill for several years.

-gallbladder disease: Being on the Pill for 2 or more years is a small but increased risk.

-Pill users who do not use a barrier method of STD/HPV protection are at higher risk of HPV.

Who definitely should not use the pill?

Women with:

- blood clotting disorders (past or present)
- impaired liver function
- known or suspected cancer
- current or suspected pregnancy

Who probably should not use the pill?

Women with:

- high blood pressure, Sickle cell disease
- diabetes or a strong family history of diabetes
- gallbladder disease
- mononucleosis (recently or currently)
- surgery scheduled within the next month
- abnormal pap smear results
- classic migraine headaches
- women over 40 smoking 15 or more cigarettes/day

Other considerations and the pill

Cancer: There is no evidence the pill causes or increases the risk of cancer. In fact the Pill *decreases the risk of ovarian and uterine cancer.*

Nutrition: Pill use may reduce absorption of certain minerals and vitamins. Levels of Vitamin B2, B6, B12, C, and Folic Acid are lower in pill users. This is particularly significant with Vitamin B6 because a deficiency may cause depression. Supplementing the diet with 20 mg of Vitamin B6 has, in some cases, prevented this problem. Increasing dietary Vitamin C or taking a supplement will increase levels. Consult a qualified nutritionist before changing diet while on the pill.

Surgery: Surgery and lack of mobility can increase the risk of blood clots, *particularly* in a pill user. So, it is crucial that pill users tell their clinicians if they're scheduled for surgery.

What is the cost?

At the Student Health Center: approximately \$7 per cycle as of this printing; elsewhere \$25-\$35 per cycle. Check with the pharmacist for current prices.

The pill is an extremely effective, convenient contraceptive with additional benefits for many women. But, like every powerful drug, it has different effects on different users.



A service of the Klotz Student Health Center's Health Promotion Dept.

For more information,
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