

If you are under 35 and healthy, or between 35 and 40, healthy and do not smoke, studies show that you are a good candidate for the pill. Properly used, the pill not only prevents ovulation and pregnancy, but also makes menstrual periods more regular, shorter, and lighter.

The pill is reliable and a good contraceptive choice for most patients. However, there are things you should know before you use it. Knowing about the pill can help you use it as a successful and satisfactory method of birth control.

Note: The pill does not protect you from the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

What about side effects?

- Contrary to what most people think, the pill actually prevents two kinds of cancer.

The pill has been shown to reduce the risk of cancer of the ovaries and endometrium and has not been found to cause breast cancer.

Studies show that the risk of ovarian cancer in long-term pill users is decreased by approximately 40%. The risk of endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus) is decreased by 50%. Other studies have found that women on the pill show no overall increased risk of developing breast cancer.

- Smoking while taking the pill increases the risk of stroke and heart disease.

Smoking is one of the most dangerous habits a person can have. When a pill user smokes, her chances of having a stroke or developing heart disease increase. If she smokes, she should be especially careful to watch for the pill danger signals.

- Watch for the following danger signals while taking the pill. If you notice any, call your doctor immediately. (The first three letters of these symptoms spell out ACHES)

Abdominal pain, particularly in the area of the stomach, or sudden severe vomiting. Chest pain,

including sharp or crushing pain, coughing up blood, or sudden shortness of breath.

Headaches, dizziness, or fainting

Eye problems, for example blurred vision, flashing lights, blindness, or yellowing of the eyeballs.

Severe pain or numbness in arms or legs

Other symptoms to watch for include breast lumps, difficulty sleeping, depression and lack of energy.

You will receive additional detailed information about these warning signals with your package of pills. You should read it and make sure you understand it. Keep it handy in case you need to refer to it.

- It is a misconception that all or most women gain weight on birth control pills.

Though some pill users occasionally gain weight, it varies widely from woman to woman and rarely becomes a problem. Let the doctor know if you happen to gain weight.

- You may have some unexpected bleeding.

If you are just starting birth control pills, you might have some unexpected bleeding between periods for the first few months. This spotting or break through bleeding sometimes happens as your body gets used to the birth control pills. It is not a medical problem in most cases, and should disappear in two or three months.

Though spotting can be a nuisance, there's usually no need for you to call your doctor about it. Continue taking the pills. Taking each pill at the same time of day will decrease the chance of spotting, and you should still be protected from pregnancy if you've taken your pills correctly.

If you have pain or vaginal discharge with the spotting, you should call your doctor. It could be a sign of a medical problem.

If you suddenly develop spotting after three months or more of using the pill. And you haven't had this problem before, let your doctor know.

How should I take birth control pills?

- Swallow one pill about the same time each day.

It is a good idea to associate taking your pill with something you do every day such as brushing your teeth, washing your face, or going to bed.

It is also a good idea to use a backup method of birth control, such as abstinence, condoms, foam, suppositories, a diaphragm, or the sponge, for the first month of taking the pill.

To begin using the pill...

For a Sunday start, swallow the first pill in the top row of your first pack on the first Sunday after your period begins. (See chart below)

If Your period begins on:	Take your first tablet on:
Sunday	That same day (Sunday)
Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday	The following Sunday

For a Day-Five start, swallow the first pill in the top row of your first pack on the fifth day (DAY FIVE) After your period begins. (Count the day your period begins as Day 1. See the chart below.)

If your period begins on:	Take your first tablet on:
Sunday	Thursday
Monday	Friday
Tuesday	Saturday
Wednesday	Sunday
Thursday	Monday
Friday	Tuesday
Saturday	Wednesday

- **After you've taken all the pills in one pack...**

If you have a pack with 21 pills, skip 7 days before talking the first pill from the next pack. (In other words, do not take a pill for 7 days)

You are still protected from pregnancy during those days if you took all your pills correctly.

If you have a pack with 28 pills, take the first pill from the next pack the day after you've taken the last pill from the previous pack. Do not skip any days. (The green pills in the 28 pill pack do not contain any hormones. They are included in the pack so that it's easier to stay in the habit of taking a pill every day.)

What should I do if...

- **If you forget to take a pill, take it as soon as you remember.**

Don't panic-though your chances increase slightly, you probably won't get pregnant if you forget one pill. Take the pill as soon as you remember, even if it is the following day. Then take the next one at the usual time. If you don't remember until you go to take the next day's pill, take the two pills at the same time.

Here's an example. Suppose you get home late on Friday night and forget to take your pill before bed. You remember it when you get up on Saturday. Take Friday's pill right away, and take Saturday's pill Saturday evening when you usually take your pill.

If you forget two in a row, take two on the day you remember and two the next day. Use a backup method of birth control for added protection against pregnancy.

If you forget three or more pills in a row you will have a period very soon. Throw away the rest of the month's pills and use your backup birth control method. If you find you're missing pills often you should think of switching to another method of birth control. It is very important that you take your pill every day for it to effectively prevent pregnancy.

- **If you have some bleeding between periods during the first few months on the pill, it's not a medical problem in most cases.**

If you're just starting to take birth control pills, you might have some unexpected bleeding between periods for the first few months. (Go to subheading "What are the side effects?" for more details.)

If you miss a period it is not a problem if you have taken your pill every day.

Some women on the pill have scanty periods, or may miss their period from time to time. Don't be alarmed if you skip one period every once in a while if you've taken your pills every day.

But what if you miss two periods in a row, even if you've taken your pills every day or if you've forgotten to take two or more pills that month, see your doctor for a pregnancy test or pelvic exam right away.

■ **If you need to take antibiotics or if you have prolonged diarrhea or vomiting, use your backup method until your next period.**

If you develop an illness requiring antibiotics or are vomiting or having diarrhea frequently, your body might not completely absorb the hormones in the pill. You should use a backup method of birth control until your next period. If you have questions about a specific drug or illnesses ask your doctor.

I have some other questions...

■ **Do I need to stop taking the pill every once in a while to give my body a rest from the hormones?**

No, a rest period is not necessary, especially if you have not noticed any of the pill danger signals and your blood pressure and annual exams are normal.

■ **How will the pill affect my period?**

In general, the pill makes menstrual periods more regular, shorter, and lighter. It may also decrease menstrual pain and cramps, and the pain some women have with ovulation. For some women, cyclic depression and other symptoms prior to their periods improve a great deal.

■ **Is it possible for me to get pregnant even though I've taken the pills correctly?**

Yes, but it is very unlikely. Oral contraceptives are over 99% effective if used correctly. Only abstinence and surgical procedures are more effective methods

and these are not acceptable choices for many women.

■ **What should I do when I decide I want to become pregnant?**

Most women have no problem getting pregnant after taking the pill. Simply finish the pack you are currently taking and do not start another one. Some doctors suggest you use another method of birth control until you have two or three periods off the pill so it's easy to calculate exactly when you become pregnant. Consult your doctor for his or her specific recommendations if this applies to you.