

Contraception - the pill

Oral hormonal contraception, known as 'the pill', is highly effective in preventing a pregnancy when taken correctly. In Australia, the two types available are the combined pill and the mini pill. Both types can be purchased from pharmacies with a doctor's prescription.

Different methods of contraception may suit you at different times in your life. Talk with your doctor or health care provider about the risks, benefits and alternatives to taking the pill.

The combined pill

The combined pill is made of synthetic versions of the natural hormones oestrogen and progesterone. The pill works by:

- Preventing an egg from being released each month (ovulation)
- Thickening the mucus made by the cervix (entrance to the womb), making it harder for sperm to get through
- Changing the lining of the uterus (womb) to prevent a fertilised egg from sticking.

If used correctly, the combined pill is 99.7 per cent effective in preventing a pregnancy.

The combined pill comes in different forms, including:

- Pills with fixed dose combinations
- Pills that vary in dose throughout the cycle
- Pills with different types of synthetic oestrogen and progesterone.

The combined pill is packaged in either 21-day or 28-day ED (everyday) packs. All packs contain at least 21 hormone pills. With the 21-day packs, pills are taken for 21 days with a seven-day break. The 28-day packs also contain up to seven inactive (sugar) pills, so a pill is taken every day.

Advantages of the combined pill

Advantages of taking the combined pill include the following:

- It usually causes lighter and more regular periods.
- Symptoms associated with periods such as pain, mood swings and headaches can improve.
- It reduces the risk of cancer of the ovaries and uterus.
- Periods can be safely skipped for convenience.
- Acne usually improves.

Disadvantages of the combined pill

Disadvantages of taking the combined pill include the following:

- You need to remember to take a pill every day.
- Cost may be an issue.
- You need to be able to visit your doctor regularly to renew your prescription.
- You may experience side effects such as nausea, breast tenderness, headaches and increased appetite.
- You may experience serious complications such as deep vein thrombosis (blood clots), heart attacks and strokes.

- This form of contraception is not suitable if you have risk factors for certain medical conditions, such as if you're a smoker aged over 35 years.
- Diarrhoea, vomiting and some medications (including the natural remedy St John's Wort) can interfere with the pill's effectiveness.
- It doesn't protect against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

The mini pill

The mini pill or progestogen-only pill contains only one hormone – synthetic progesterone. It works by thickening the mucus made by the cervix (entrance to the uterus), making it harder for sperm to get through. A pill must be taken every day at the same time. If taken correctly, the mini pill is up to 99.7 per cent effective in preventing a pregnancy, but is less effective in younger women.

Advantages of the mini pill

Advantages of taking the mini pill include the following:

- It's a good alternative if you can't take oral contraception that contains oestrogen.
- It doesn't affect breastfeeding.

Disadvantages of the mini pill

Disadvantages of taking the mini pill include the following:

- The mini pill must be taken within three hours of the same time every day.
- It can cause unpredictable bleeding patterns.
- It doesn't protect against STIs.
- Diarrhoea, vomiting and some medications (including the natural remedy St John's Wort) can interfere with the pill's effectiveness.

Cancer concerns and the pill

Whether the pill increases the risk of breast cancer is uncertain. Experts agree that, if it does increase the risk, the increase is small. The pill has been found to **reduce** the risk of cancer of the ovaries and uterus and may also reduce the risk of bowel cancer.

Emergency contraception

Sometimes it's necessary to prevent a pregnancy **after** sex rather than before: for example, when a pill is forgotten or a condom breaks, or in the case of rape. Emergency contraception ('the morning after pill') can be taken after having unprotected sex to prevent a pregnancy.

The most commonly used form of emergency contraception has one tablet of synthetic progesterone and is available from pharmacies without a doctor's prescription. Emergency contraception works well for up to 72 hours, but is most effective if taken within 24 hours of having unprotected sex. It will still have some effect if taken within 120 hours (five days).

Other types of contraception

There are a number of contraceptive choices available in Australia. Talk with your doctor or health care provider about your options. The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships. It's important to weigh up the benefits and disadvantages of each method and think about your current and future needs.

Protect against STIs

The pill doesn't protect against sexually transmissible infections so it is important to practice safe sex. The best way to reduce the risk of STIs is to use barrier protection such as condoms and dams (a thin piece of latex placed over the anus or vagina during oral sex) with all new sexual partners. Condoms can be used for oral, vaginal and anal sex with the pill to help prevent the spread of infections.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 or the Action Centre (for people under 25 years) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9660 4700
- The Women's Health Information Centre (WHIC) Tel. (03) 8345 3045
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
- Your local community health centre
- A pharmacist

Things to remember

- Oral hormonal contraception, known as 'the pill', is highly effective in preventing a pregnancy when taken correctly.
- The two types of oral contraception available in Australia are the combined pill and the mini pill.
- Oral contraception doesn't protect against sexually transmissible infections – the best way to reduce the risk of STIs is to use barrier protection such as condoms and dams with all new sexual partners.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Family Planning Victoria

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