

Be sure you know when to start your pill. If you have any questions, ask your doctor or nurse practitioner.

When you have one refill remaining, remember to call your doctor or nurse practitioner. Depending on your medical history and the date of your last exam, your health provider will give you another prescription or schedule an exam.

### **A Final Word**

If you need medical advice, call your doctor or nurse practitioner or telephone the advice nurse. For more information about health and medical topics, educational programs and community resources, visit your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or call your Health Education Department.

# *the* PILL



The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have further questions, please consult your health care provider.

Developed by  
Health Education Department  
Kaiser Permanente Medical Center  
Hayward

*Knowing  
the facts  
about oral  
contraceptives*

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## How Does the Pill Work?

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Oral contraceptives, commonly known as the birth control pill, contain two hormones: estrogen and progesterone. This combination of hormones reduces the chance of an egg being released from the ovary. Other changes occur including changes in the cervical mucus which also help to prevent pregnancy. When you finish taking the active hormone pills in your package, the hormone levels in your body decrease. Then your period begins. If the pill is taken as directed, it is 99% effective in preventing pregnancy.

## What Other Health Benefits Result From Taking Birth Control Pills?

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Birth control pills frequently provide relief from:

- painful periods (dysmenorrhea)
- irregular menstrual cycles
- pain at the time of ovulation (when the egg is released)
- painful breasts (benign breast disease)
- ovarian cysts
- acne
- anemia due to very heavy menstrual flow

Using birth control pills also has protective benefits. Women who use birth control pills are less likely to develop the following:

- ovarian cancer
- endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus)
- ectopic pregnancy
- endometriosis
- pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), (infection in pelvis, uterus, or tubes)

## Taking the Pill:

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Pills come in packs of 21 or 28 pills.

Take your pill **at the same time each day.**

- It is helpful to take your pills with some daily activity like going to bed or eating a meal. This may help you to remember. Pills work best if you take them about the

same time each day in order to keep a constant level of the hormones in your system.

*If you forget to take a pill, follow these directions:*

If you **miss 1** “active” pill:

1. Take it as soon as you remember. Take the next pill at your regular time. This means you may take 2 pills in 1 day.
2. You do not need to use a backup birth control method if you have sex.

If you **miss 2** “active” pills in a row:

1. Take 2 pills on the day you remember and 2 pills the next day.
2. Then take 1 pill a day until you finish the pack.
3. You may become pregnant if you have sex after you miss pills. You must use another birth control method (such as condoms together with foam) as backup for the remainder of the cycle (pack of pills).

If you **miss 3 or more** “active” pills in a row:

**If you are a Day 1 starter:**

1. Throw out the rest of the pill pack and start a new pack that same day.
2. Then take 1 pill a day until you finish the pack.
3. You may become pregnant if you have sex after you miss pills. You must use another birth control method (such as condoms together with foam) as backup for the remainder of the cycle (pack of pills).
4. You may start bleeding earlier than expected or you may not have your period this month. This is normal. However, if you miss your period 2 months in a row, call your doctor or nurse practitioner because you might become pregnant.

**If you are a Sunday starter:**

1. Keep taking 1 pill every day until Sunday. On Sunday, throw out the rest of the pack and start a new pack of pills that same day.
2. You may start bleeding earlier than expected or you may not have your period this month. This is normal. However, if you miss your period 2 months in a row, call your doctor or nurse practitioner because you might become pregnant.

3. You may become pregnant if you have sex after you miss pills. You must use another birth control method (such as condoms together with foam) as backup for the remainder of the cycle (pack of pills).

### **A reminder for those on 28 day packs:**

**If you forget any of the 7 “reminder” pills in week 4 :** throw away the pills you missed. Keep taking 1 pill each day until the pack is empty. You do not need a backup method if you start your next pack on time.

**Finally, if you are still not sure what to do about the pills you have missed:** Use a backup method any time you have sex. Keep taking 1 “active” pill each day until you can reach your doctor or clinic.

### **How Will the Pill Affect My Periods?**

Your periods will most likely be lighter without menstrual cramps. Since the pill controls the menstrual cycle, your periods will come every 28 days. Once in awhile, you will not have a period. If you don't have a period and ***you never missed taking a pill***, continue taking them and contact your doctor. If you have missed a pill and don't get a period, call the advice nurse immediately.

**No bleeding** (amenorrhea) usually does not mean you are pregnant; it is just your body's response to the hormones. Sometimes, you may need to change to a pill with a different dose of estrogen.

### **Is the Low-Dose Pill Safer to Use?**

**YES!** The lower hormone levels in today's pills make them safer to use. However, because of their lower hormone levels, there is a slightly increased chance of menstrual irregularity in the first few cycles. This may result in spotting between periods (breakthrough bleeding).

### **What Menstrual Irregularities May Occur?**

Spotting, or breakthrough bleeding, is most common during the first three months of use of low-dose pills. It usually stops after your body has become accustomed to the hormones. Some

women will have to switch to a different pill because of continued breakthrough bleeding. Call your doctor if breakthrough bleeding persists after 3 months.

### **What Are the Serious Side Effects I Might Look For When Taking Birth Control Pills?**

- severe abdominal pain
- severe chest pain, cough or shortness of breath
- severe headache, dizziness, weakness or numbness
- vision loss or blurring, speech problems
- severe leg pain (calf or thigh)

These serious side effects require immediate attention. Call your doctor if you have any of these problems or if you develop any of the following:

*severe depression, yellow jaundice, or a breast lump.*

### **What Are the Minor Side Effects I Might Experience When Taking Birth Control Pills?**

Some of the minor side effects include slight weight gain or weight loss, breast tenderness, depression, nausea, hair loss, increase or decrease in sex drive, eye changes causing inability to wear contact lenses, fluid retention, headaches, and chloasma (skin darkening on upper lip, under eyes, or on forehead).

### **Who Should Not Take the Pill?**

The pill is usually safe for women between the ages of 13 and 40. **However, if you have any of the following medical conditions, you should consult your doctor before taking the pill:**

- unusual vaginal bleeding which has not been evaluated or diagnosed
- known or possible pregnancy
- you have had a heart attack or stroke
- history of blood clot in the legs, lungs, brain, heart or elsewhere
- history of cancer of the breast or sex organs
- liver disease or tumor

## **Can I Take the Pill if I am Over 40 Years Old?**

**YES!** A majority of experts today believe that the pill can be safely used by many women until menopause. Women older than 40 years taking the pill should meet these guidelines:

- nonsmoker
- not more than 30% above ideal body weight
- normal blood sugar
- normal cholesterol and blood fats
- normal mammogram
- no family history of early heart disease

## **When Should I Start My First Pack of Pills?**

You have a choice for which days to start taking your first pack of pills. Decide with your doctor or clinic which is the best day for you. Pick a time of day which will be easy to remember.

### **Day 1 start:**

1. Take the first “active” pill of the first pack during the first 24 hours of your period.
2. You will need to use a backup method of birth control (such as condoms together with foam) for the first month (pack of pills).

### **Sunday start:**

1. Take the first “active” pill of the first pack on the Sunday after your period starts, even if you are still bleeding. If your period begins on Sunday, start the pack that same day.
2. You will need to use a backup method of birth control (such as condoms together with foam) for the first month (pack of pills).

## **Will the Pill Protect Me From Sexually Transmitted Diseases?**

**NO. ABSOLUTELY NOT!** For protection against sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, you must follow safe sex practices. Condoms with nonoxynol-9 are highly effective in preventing STDs. The pill will only protect against getting pregnant.

## **If I am a Teenager, Is It Safe to Take the Pill?**

**YES!** The pill is safe for younger women who have established periods. Teens tend to have fewer side effects than adult women using the pill.

## **What Effect Does the Pill Have on Future Pregnancy?**

You **can** get pregnant immediately after stopping birth control pills. You should use another method of birth control right away if you don't want to become pregnant. For women who want to get pregnant after stopping the pill, there may be a short delay of 1-2 months before normal periods resume.

## **Can I Take the Pill When Breastfeeding?**

**YES!** Consult your doctor before resuming birth control pills after childbirth. It is advisable to wait until after breastfeeding is well established before taking birth control pills. Low-dose combined pills appear to have little effect on the nutritional status of infants, and the hormones in the pill that do appear in small amounts in breast milk do not seem to affect breastfed babies. However, since combined oral contraceptives (estrogen & progesterone pills) may suppress lactation, some providers will prescribe progestin-only oral contraceptives for breastfeeding women.

## **Will the Pill Still Prevent Pregnancy If I Am Taking Antibiotics?**

**NO!** Some antibiotics have been found to interfere with the pill's effectiveness. ***This means you could get pregnant!*** Always tell your doctor or nurse practitioner you are on the pill when he/she asks if you are taking any medications. You should use an alternate method of birth control (such as condoms) during the time you are taking antibiotics.

## **How Do I Get the Pill?**

Your doctor or nurse practitioner will give you a prescription for your birth control pills. You can get it filled at any Kaiser Permanente pharmacy, or you can take it to an outside pharmacy.