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Birth Control Pills

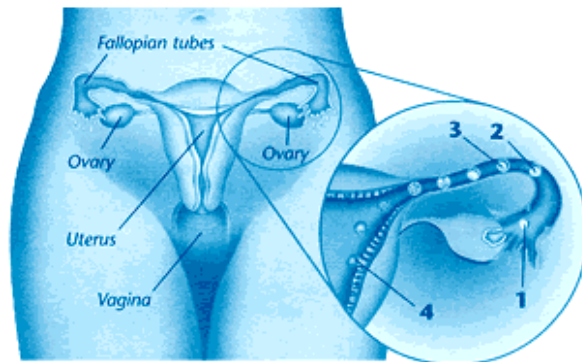
Birth control pills (also called oral contraceptives or "the pill") are used by millions of women in the United States to prevent pregnancy. The pill is safe and effective for most women. This pamphlet will explain:

- How birth control pills work
- Benefits of the pill
- Side effects and risks **Reproduction**

To understand how birth control pills work, you should know what happens during reproduction. A woman has two ovaries, one on each side of the uterus. Each month, one of the ovaries releases an egg into a fallopian tube. This is called ovulation. It typically occurs about 12-14 days before the start of the menstrual period.

A woman can get pregnant if she has sex around the time of ovulation. During sex, the man ejaculates sperm into the vagina. The sperm travel up through the cervix and into the fallopian tubes.

If a sperm meets an egg in the fallopian tube, fertilization--union of egg and sperm--can occur (see figure below). The fertilized egg then moves down the fallopian tube to the uterus. It attaches to the uterus and grows into a **fetus**.



Each month during ovulation an egg is released (1) and moves into one of the fallopian tubes (2). If a woman has sex around this time, an egg may meet a sperm in the fallopian tube, and the two will join (3). This is called fertilization. The fertilized egg then moves through the fallopian tube into the uterus and becomes attached there to grow during pregnancy (4).

About Birth Control Pills

Birth control pills are a type of hormonal birth control. With these methods, a woman takes hormones similar to those her body makes naturally. These hormones prevent ovulation. When there is no egg to be fertilized, pregnancy cannot occur. The hormones also cause changes in the cervical mucus and uterus that help prevent pregnancy.

The pill must be prescribed by a doctor. It is a very effective form of birth control. When women use the pill correctly, fewer than 1 in 100 will get pregnant over 1 year. However, about 3 in 100 typical users (3%) will become pregnant. This is because a pill may be missed or is not absorbed (due to vomiting, for instance). If a dose is missed or not absorbed, a backup method of birth control, such as a condom, should be used.

The birth control pill is easy to use and convenient. You do not need to do anything else before sex to prevent pregnancy. It does not protect against **sexually transmitted diseases**. If you are at risk, you should use condoms for protection.

There are two basic types of birth control pills: combination pills and progestin-only pills. Most women who take the pill take a combination pill.

Combination Pills

Combination birth control pills contain the hormones **estrogen** and progestin (a synthetic form of the hormone **progesterone**). There are many different brands with different doses of hormones. This gives a woman a choice in finding a pill that is right for her.

Myths About the Combination Pill

-Taking the pill is risky.

- The pill may be risky for women older than 35 years of age who smoke. For almost all women, though, the benefits of the pill outweigh any possible risks.

-Taking the pill causes weight gain.

- As many women lose weight as gain weight while taking the pill.

-Taking a break from the pill now and then is a good idea.

- There is no health benefit to taking a break from the pill. Taking a break may increase a woman's chances of an unwanted pregnancy.

-The pill causes cancer.

- Most studies show that the pill does not increase the risk of cervical or breast cancer and it decreases the risk of endometrial cancer.

-A woman will not be able to get pregnant until she has stopped taking the pill for a long period of time.

- The pill is out of a woman's system and she is able to get pregnant within 24 hours of when she stops taking it.

Before your doctor or nurse will prescribe birth control pills for you, he or she will ask you some questions about your health and your family history. He or she also may do a physical exam, which may include a pelvic exam and breast exam.

How They Work

Estrogen and progestin, which are produced in the ovaries, affect the menstrual cycle and fertility. By altering the natural levels of these hormones, birth control pills can affect ovulation and other reproductive functions.

Both estrogens and progestins cause the endometrium to change. When you are not pregnant, the level of progesterone decreases, and menstruation occurs. If you are pregnant, a sharp increase in these hormones keeps you from ovulating and having your period. Taking the pill mimics this sharp increase enough to keep you from ovulating. Without an egg, pregnancy cannot occur. However, because there are days that you do not take hormones, you still have your period.

The hormones in the pill also cause changes in the cervical mucus and the endometrium (lining of the uterus). The cervical mucus thickens, blocking the sperm from entering the cervix. The endometrium thins, making it less likely that a fertilized egg can attach to the lining of the uterus. Together, these three events make it very unlikely that someone taking the pill will become pregnant.

How To Take Them

You can start taking the pill on the first day of your period. You will not need a backup method of birth control.

For convenience, many pill users start taking the pill on the Sunday after their periods start. You can start even if you are still bleeding. Women who start to take pills on a Sunday will have their periods in the middle of the week in most cases.

If You Miss a Pill

You may forget to take a pill once in a while. If you forget to take one pill, take it as soon as you remember.

Take the next pill at the normal time. It is okay if you have to take two pills in the same day. It is normal to feel a bit queasy if you do this.

If you forget to take two or more pills, use a backup method of birth control. Call your doctor or nurse, and ask what you should do.

If you miss some pills, you may have some spotting or light bleeding even if you make up the missed pills. These side effects are not harmful.

If you have a 28-day combination pill pack and forget to take one of the last seven "reminder" pills (pills without hormones), do not worry. Throw away the reminder pills you missed. Keep taking one pill a day until the pack is empty. You should start your new pack of pills on the same day of the week that you started your first pack.

If you start on a Sunday, use another birth control method for the next 7 days of the first cycle as a backup method. Condoms and spermicide are a good choice. This is the only time you will need to use a backup method unless you forget to take your pills.

You will start each new pack of pills on the same day of the week as you started the first pack. It is a good idea to have an extra pack of pills and a backup method on hand in case you miss some pills or lose your pack.

Pills only work if you take them correctly. Do not skip pills for any reason--even if you bleed between periods or feel sick. Call your doctor or nurse if you are concerned. Even if you do not have sex very often, you should keep taking the pill.

Your pills may not work well if your body does not absorb them. This may happen if you are taking certain medications or if you vomit. If you can't keep your pill down, you should use a backup method for the rest of your cycle.

Pills come in packs of 21 or 28 pills:

- 21 Pills--If your pack has 21 pills, take one pill at the same time each day for 21 days. Wait 7 days before starting a new pack. During the week you are not taking the pill, you will have your period. Keep in mind that you will start your new pack of pills on the same day of the week as you started the first pack.
- 28 Pills--If your pack has 28 pills, take one pill at the same time each day for 28 days. When you finish all the pills in the pack, start a new pack the next day. During the week you are taking the last seven pills, you will have your period.

Each new pack of pills comes with facts about the pill. Read this, and ask your doctor about anything that is not clear to you.

Benefits

The combination birth control pill has benefits in addition to preventing pregnancy (see box). The pill also helps to keep your periods regular, lighter, and shorter and reduces menstrual cramps.

Side Effects

Some women have side effects when they are on the pill. These may include:

- Headache
- Tender breasts
- Nausea
- Irregular bleeding
- Missed periods
- Depression

Most side effects are minor and often go away after a few months of use. There will likely be fewer side effects if the pill is taken at the same time every day.

For nausea, many women find that taking the pill with a meal or before bed helps. For headaches, taking over-the-counter products for pain relief often helps.

Missing a period is common. If you miss one period and have taken the pill as prescribed, you should keep taking the pill. If you have forgotten some pills and miss one period, call your doctor. Don't stop taking the pill. It is not likely that you are pregnant. Using birth control pills during pregnancy does not increase the risk of birth defects.

Risks

Some women should not use birth control pills. The pill may not be a good choice for women who smoke and are older than age 35 years and have certain health problems or have a family history of certain health problems. Talk to your doctor about whether the pill is a good choice for you.

Benefits of The Pill

Besides being a highly effective method of birth control, using combination birth control pills reduces the risk of certain health problems, including:

- Cancer of the endometrium and ovary
- Ovarian cysts
- Pelvic inflammatory disease
- Bone loss
- Benign breast disease
- Symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome
- Anemia (iron poor blood)
- **Ectopic pregnancy**
- Acne

Although rare, the pill can cause severe illness in some women. The most serious problem is cardiovascular disease, such as blood clots in the legs or lungs, heart attack, or stroke. Other rare problems that may occur include high blood pressure and problems with the liver and gall bladder.

Warning Signs

If you are taking combination birth control pills and develop any of these symptoms, call your doctor:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Sudden, unexplained chest pain, cough, or shortness of breath
- Severe headache or dizziness
- Weakness or numbness on one side of your body
- Blurred or double vision

- Speech problems
- Severe leg pain (calf or thigh)

Some women are afraid to take the pill because they have a family history of breast cancer. Most experts agree that women who have no other risk factors do not have an increased risk of getting breast cancer by taking the pill. These women can take the pill.

Progestin-Only Pills

Some women may want or need to take another type of birth control pill that contains only progestin. It does not contain estrogen. It is called the progestin-only pill or the minipill. This type of pill is not as effective as pills that contain estrogen.

The progestin-only pill is a better choice for women who have certain health problems--such as blood clots--and cannot take pills with estrogen. This method also may be the best choice for women who had side effects with the birth control pill or who are breastfeeding.

How They Work

Progestin-only pills contain only a small dose of progestin--about 25-70% of the amount in the combination pill. Minipills prevent ovulation in about one half of a woman's menstrual cycles. They also change cervical mucus. The mucus thickens, making it hard for sperm to penetrate the cervix. Changes also occur in the endometrium.

How To Take Them

The minipill comes in packs of 28 pills. All the pills in the pack contain hormones. It is important not to miss a pill.

It is very important to take the progestin-only pill at the same time each day. It, therefore, may not be a good choice for people who have trouble keeping to a schedule.

It is best to take the progestin-only pill early in the day. Taking it at bedtime could make it less effective. Cervical mucus protection is greatest between 4 and 20 hours after taking it. You should use a backup method of contraception for 48 hours if vomiting occurs after taking a pill or if you are 3 hours or more late in taking a pill.

Benefits

Progestin-only pills do not offer the same benefits that pills with estrogen offer. Most people who choose the progestin-only pill do so because there are reasons they should not take estrogen. Progestin-only pills offer some protection against:

- Cancer of the uterus and ovaries
- Benign breast disease
- Pelvic infection

Side Effects

Women who take the progestin-only pill may have more bleeding or spotting days than women who take birth control pills that contain estrogen. Other possible side effects of the progestin-only pill include:

- Prolonged or irregular bleeding
- Missed periods
- Headache
- Tender breasts
- Nausea

- Dizziness
- Acne
- Unwanted hair growth
- Weight gain
- Anxiety
- Depression

Risks

The progestin-only pill must be prescribed by a doctor. A total of 3-6 women per 100 will get pregnant while on the progestin-only pill. Pregnancy rates are increased in women who weigh more than 130 pounds. Women older than 40 years of age and women who are breastfeeding have lower pregnancy rates because they are less fertile.

The progestin-only pill is not a good choice for some women. For instance, it may not be a good choice if you:

- Know or suspect you have breast cancer
- Have heavy or irregular vaginal bleeding
- Have certain liver problems
- Are taking certain medications

Compared with pills that contain estrogen, the progestin-only pill increases the risk of:

- Ectopic pregnancy
- Ovarian cysts
- Vaginal bleeding

Finally . . .

The pill is a good choice for women who may want to get pregnant later. It is a safe and effective way to prevent pregnancy. It is easy to use, convenient, and reversible. The pill may protect against some cancers. Some benefits of pill use last months or years after you stop taking it. For almost all women, the benefits of pill use outweigh the risks.

Glossary

1. **Ectopic Pregnancy:** A pregnancy in which the fertilized egg begins to grow in a place other than inside the uterus, usually in the fallopian tubes.
2. **Estrogen:** A female hormone produced in the ovaries that stimulates the growth of the lining of the uterus.
3. **Fetus:** A baby growing in the woman's uterus.
4. **Progesterone:** A female hormone that is produced in the ovaries and makes the lining of the uterus grow. When the level of progesterone decreases, menstruation occurs.
5. **Sexually Transmitted Diseases:** Diseases that are spread by sexual contact, including chlamydial infection, gonorrhea, genital warts, herpes, syphilis, and infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS]).