

The Combined Pill

Combined oral contraceptive pill

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NHS Foundation Trust

What is the combined pill?

The combined pill is usually just called “the pill”. It contains two female hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. There are many different types of combined pill.

How does the pill work?

- It stops the ovaries from producing an egg (ovulation) every month.
- It thickens the mucus in your cervix, which will stop sperm reaching your egg.
- It thins the lining of the womb.

How effective is the pill?

The effectiveness of the pill depends on the woman taking it. At best it is over 99% effective (when no pills are missed). However failure rates can be much higher (9-15%) if women do not remember to take their pill properly.

Advantages of the pill

- It usually makes periods lighter, shorter and less painful.
- It may improve acne in some women.
- It reduces the risk of cancer of the ovary, uterus and colon.
- It may reduce menopausal symptoms.
- It may help with premenstrual symptoms.
- It may reduce the risk of fibroids, ovarian cysts and non-cancerous breast disease.
- It doesn't interfere with sex.

Disadvantages of the pill

- You may get some temporary side effects such as headaches, nausea, breast tenderness and mood changes, If these do not improve speak to the clinic nurse or doctor about them.
- It may increase your blood pressure.
- Breakthrough bleeding or spotting is common in the first few months.

Will I put on weight with the pill?

There is no research to show that the pill causes weight gain. If you do gain weight it may be due to your lifestyle – talk to the clinic nurse or doctor about sensible eating and exercise habits.

How do I take the pill?

- You can start the pill anytime in your menstrual cycle if you are sure you are not pregnant.
- If you start on the first day of your period you are protected from pregnancy straightaway.
- If you start your pill at any other time you will need to use condoms for the first 7 days.

Standard way of taking the pill

- Take your 1st pill from the pack, marked with the correct day of the week, and then take a pill every day at the same time until the pack is finished (21 days).
- Then stop taking the pill for 7 days, during this week you will usually get a “withdrawal bleed” which is caused by not taking the hormones.
- Start the next pack on the 8th day – you will always start the pill on the same day of the week.
- You are protected from pregnancy during your pill free week as long as you start taking your pill again on the 8th day.

New way of taking the pill

The clinic doctor or nurse may suggest that you take the pill in a different, more modern way. This has several advantages: you will have less breaks from the pill and therefore less periods. Because you have less breaks from the pill it may be more effective at preventing pregnancy.

- Take your 1st pill from the pack, marked with the correct day of the week, and then take a pill every day at the same time until the pack is finished.
- Then continue on to the next pack **without having a break**. You can take 2 or 3 packs in a row like this.
- When the 2nd or 3rd pack is finished, have a 4 day break from the pill and start taking your pill on the 5th day. You will not always start your pill on the same day of the week.
- You will get a “withdrawal bleed” which will probably start at the end of your pill free break and may last for the first few days of the new pack.

- You are protected from pregnancy during the 4 days that you do not take the pill as long as you start taking it again on the 5th day.
- It is common to get breakthrough bleeding in the first few packs of pills. If this continues it may be better for you to have a break after every 2 packs rather than take 3 packs in a row. Talk to your clinic doctor or nurse if this continues as you may also need screening for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Missed pills

- If you miss any pills by more than 12 hours, continue taking the pill as usual and use condoms for the next 7 days.
- If you miss more than 2 pills and you have had unprotected sex in the last 7 days then you may need emergency contraception, please seek advice.

Are there any risks?

- The pill can have some serious side effects but they are not common. We will discuss these with you.
- If you have been given the pill from this clinic it means that you have a low risk for these serious conditions.
- Research suggests that users of the pill appear to have a small increase in the risk of breast cancer and cervical cancer. The risk of breast cancer in young women taking the pill remains very low. You will be invited to have cervical cytology screening (a "smear test") when you are 25. The smear test is an important way of reducing your risk of cervical cancer.

You should see a doctor straightaway if you have any of the following:

- Severe chest pains, breathlessness or coughing up blood
- Painful swelling in the leg
- Severe migraine
- Sudden weakness or numbness in an arm or leg
- Sudden problems with speech or eyesight
- Jaundice (yellowing of skin or eyes)
- Fainting attack

I've just had a baby. Can I take the pill?

You can start taking the pill 21 days after you gave birth and will be protected from pregnancy straightaway. If you are breastfeeding a baby it may be better to use another method of contraception as the combined pill may reduce the flow of milk.

Can I use the pill after a miscarriage or abortion?

Yes, you can start the pill immediately after a miscarriage or abortion.

Will other medicines affect my pill?

Always check with your clinician as some medication can reduce the effectiveness of the pill, including some over the counter medicines like St John's Wort.

What should I do if I am sick or have diarrhoea?

If you vomit within 2 hours of taking a pill it will not be absorbed and you should take another one. If you have severe sickness and diarrhoea and cannot take your pill then start taking the pill again when you feel well enough but you will need to use condoms for the next 7 days.

Does the pill protect me from sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

No, the pill only protects you from pregnancy. To avoid STIs including chlamydia, gonorrhoea & HIV, it is important to use condoms as well.

Condoms are available free from the Sexual Health Clinic.

Sexual Health Sheffield

Visit Sexual Health Sheffield's website for opening times.

www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk

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