Patient & Family Guide

2024

Birth Control Pills

Aussi disponible en français : FF85-2027

nova scotia health

www.nshealth.ca

Birth Control Pills

What are birth control pills (often called "the pill")?

- Birth control pills usually have 2 hormones:
  - Estrogen
  - Progestin
- They are used to prevent pregnancy.

How do birth control pills work?

- Birth control pills prevent pregnancy by:
  - preventing an egg from leaving your ovary each month. This prevents fertilization (when an egg and sperm join).
  - changing your uterus lining. This makes it harder for an egg to attach to the uterus wall.

How well do birth control pills work?

- Birth control pills are more than 91% effective in preventing pregnancy for most people.

When do birth control pills start working?

- Birth control pills start working after you have taken the first package of pills over 30 days (1 month).
- **Use another method of birth control (like a condom and spermicide) or wait to have sex for 30 days after starting birth control pills**.

Pros of birth control pills:

- They are easy to take.
- They may help to make your periods more regular.
- They may make period cramps less painful.
- Your period flow may be lighter.
- They may lower your chance of getting ovarian cancer or endometrial (uterus lining) cancer.
- They may help to keep your bones healthy.
- They may help to lower acne.
- People who do not smoke may safely take them until menopause.

Cons of birth control pills:

- You have to remember to take a pill at the same time every day.
- You have to see a primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) to get a prescription.

Who should not take birth control pills?

- You should **not** take birth control pills if you smoke and are 35 years old or older.

Smoking and birth control pills

- Birth control pills are **not** prescribed for people who smoke and are 35 years old or older. This is because the risk of stroke and heart attack is too high.
- If you smoke, we encourage you to stop. Smoking raises your risk of high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, and blood clots.
- Birth control pills are safe for people who do not smoke until menopause.

How do I take birth control pills?

- Take each pill **within 4 hours of the same time every day**. Choose a time that combines taking your pill with doing something else (like going to bed or eating breakfast).

Pills come in 21-day or 28-day packages.

21-day package:

› Take the first pill any day you choose.

› Take 1 pill at the same time each day for 21 days (the package will be empty).

› It is common to have spotting or bleeding while taking your first package of pills.

› When you have taken all 21 pills, wait 7 days (1 week) before starting a new package.

› You will probably have your period during the week when you are not taking any pills. If you do not have your period after you finish taking the first package, keep taking the pills on schedule. **If you do not have your period after taking the second package, take a pregnancy test and see your primary health care provider**.

28-day package:

- Take the first pill any day you choose.
- Take 1 pill at the same time each day for 28 days (the package will be empty).
- Start a new package of birth control pills the next day.

- The last 7 reminder pills (or “sugar” pills) do not have any hormones. Taking them helps you to keep up your daily routine.
- You will probably have your period while you are taking the last 7 pills.
- It is common to have spotting or bleeding while taking your first package of pills.

What makes birth control pills less effective?

- **Some medications can change how well birth control pills work**. Always check with your primary health care provider or your pharmacist before taking other medications while taking birth control pills.
- Birth control pills may not work as well after vomiting (throwing up) or having diarrhea (loose, watery poop) **even once**, because your body may not have absorbed (taken in) the pill.

If you are taking a medication that may change how well your birth control pills work, or you have vomiting or diarrhea even once, keep taking your birth control pills. Use another method of birth control as a back-up, or wait to have sex until after you start the next package of pills.

What if I forget to take a birth control pill?

- **You can get pregnant if you forget to take 1 pill or even if you are 4 hours late taking a pill**. Your hormone levels may go down and you may ovulate.

If you miss 1 pill:

› Take the missed pill as soon as you remember.

› Take your next pill at the usual time.

› **Use another method of birth control while taking the rest of the pills in that package, or wait to have sex until after you start the next package**.

If you miss 2 or more pills:

- **Do not** take the missed pills.
- Keep taking the rest of the pills in the package on schedule.
- **Use another method of birth control while taking the rest of the pills in the package, or wait to have sex until after you start the next package**.

Note: If you are taking pills in a 28-day package and you forget any of the 7 reminder pills, you **do not** need to use another method of birth control.

If you have missed 1 or more pills and you do not get your period when you finish the pills in the package, see your primary health care provider.

What are the possible side effects?

You may have the following side effects for the first 3 months:

- Headache
- Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach)
- Vomiting
- Breast tenderness
- Mood changes
- Skin rash
- Acne
- Spotting or breakthrough bleeding (like a period). This **does not** mean your birth control pills are not working.

- These side effects usually go away after the first 3 months. If you still have these side effects after 3 months, see your primary health care provider so they can adjust your dose (amount). **Talk with your primary health care provider before you stop taking your birth control pills**.

Will birth control pills protect me from sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

- Birth control pills **do not** protect you from STIs, like:
  - Herpes
  - Chlamydia
  - Genital warts
  - Gonorrhea
  - HIV (the virus that causes AIDS)
- **Use a condom every time you have sex to protect yourself from STIs**.

For more information on sexual and reproductive health, visit:

- www.sexandu.ca

What are your questions?

Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here:
https://library.nshealth.ca/Patients-Guides

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: https://811.novascotia.ca

Prepared by: Reproductive Options and Services (ROSE) Clinic
Designed by: Nova Scotia Health Library Services

WP85-0171 © August 2024 Nova Scotia Health Authority
To be reviewed August 2027 or sooner, if needed.

nova scotia health