

Oral Contraceptives

Oral contraceptives are tablets taken by women to prevent pregnancy. They can be a very effective form of contraception, but do not protect against sexually transmissible diseases. Oral contraceptives may also relieve period problems and improve acne. Oral contraceptives must be prescribed by a doctor.

Oral contraceptive pills (OCPs) contain low doses of hormones similar to the natural hormones that regulate a woman's menstrual cycle. There are two main types of OCPs:

- Combined oral contraceptives (COCs), which contain two types of hormones – an oestrogen and a progestogen
- Progestogen – only pills (POPs), which contain only a progestogen.

Combined Oral Contraceptives – 'the pill'

COCs contain an oestrogen and a progestogen. They prevent pregnancy by:

- preventing ovulation (the release of the egg from the ovary)

- thickening the mucus in the cervix so sperm cannot enter the uterus (womb)
- changing the lining of the uterus (making it unsuitable for pregnancy).

COCs can also be used to manage period problems and improve acne. Some women can use COCs to manage pre-menstrual symptoms.

There are various types of the pill available in Australia, which contain different amounts and types of oestrogen and progestogen. These differences don't change how effective they are as contraceptives, but do lead to variations in health risks, side effects and costs. Different COCs may also have different effects on premenstrual symptoms, period problems and acne.

All COCs are taken once a day, but the number of tablets provided per 28 day cycle varies between products. Some products provide 21 hormone tablets only, some provide 21 hormone tablets and 7 inactive tablets, some provide 24 hormone tablets and 4 inactive tablets, and one product provides 26 hormone tablets and 2 inactive tablets per 28 days. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice about the best COC product for you.

Benefits of COCs

For many women, benefits of taking the pill may include:

- it can be up to 99.7% effective as a contraceptive if taken correctly
- it does not interfere with sex
- regular, shorter, lighter and less painful periods
- the timing of a period can be controlled
- reduced premenstrual symptoms
- acne improves
- reduced risk of endometrial and ovarian cancer.

Side effects of COCs

Most women can take the pill without experiencing side effects, however some women experience side effects for a short time when they first start taking it. Some women try several different COCs before finding one that suits them. Possible side effects include nausea, headaches, breast tenderness, mood changes, weight gain, bloating, skin pigmentation and mid-cycle menstrual

bleeding. COCs may also reduce breast milk production, so are not suitable for breastfeeding mothers.

Health risks of COCs

COCs increase the risks of thrombosis (blood clots), heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure and cervical cancer, and may increase the risk of breast cancer. They may not be suitable for women with certain medical conditions (e.g. cardiovascular disease, thrombosis, type 2 diabetes, liver disease, breast cancer, migraine), for women who smoke or for very overweight women.

Women who need surgery, or who will be sitting or lying for a long time (e.g. due to injury or travel) may need to stop their COC. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Progesterone- only pills (POPs) – ‘the minipill’

POPs contain a progestogen, but no oestrogen. They prevent pregnancy mainly by:

- Thickening the mucus of the cervix so sperm cannot enter the uterus
- Changing the lining of the uterus (making it unsuitable for pregnancy).

Benefits, side effects and risks of ‘the minipill’

The minipill is an alternative for women who cannot take oestrogen or COCs. It may be suitable for breastfeeding mothers, as it does not affect breast milk supply. The most common

side effect of the minipill is irregular menstrual bleeding. Other possible side effects include breast tenderness and headaches. The minipill may not be suitable for women with certain medical conditions (e.g. cardiovascular disease, thrombosis, breast cancer, liver disease).

Self care

OCPs are effective contraceptives only when used correctly. Things that may reduce the effectiveness of OCPs include missing a dose, vomiting, diarrhoea and some medicines. In circumstances that can reduce the effectiveness of your OCP, you may need to use an additional form of contraception (e.g. condoms). Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

- Read and follow the consumer information leaflet in your oral contraceptives pack.
- Make sure you know when to start your OCP for the first time, how to continue on with it each month and what to do if you forget to take it.
- Be alert for side effects of your OCP.
- Check with a doctor or pharmacist before taking any other medicines.
- Ensure that the doctor who prescribes your OCP is aware of all your medical conditions.
- Have your blood pressure checked regularly.
- Don't smoke.

Important

For reliable contraception, OCPs need to be taken once a day, at the same time each day. The timing of the minipill is the most strict – if it is taken more than 3 hours later than the usual time, additional contraception is needed for a further 48 hours (until 3 consecutive pills have been taken).

Consult a family planning clinic, doctor or pharmacist if:

- you miss doses of your OCP
- you are experiencing possible side effects of your OCP
- your period is missed, irregular or unusual.

Consult a doctor immediately if you are taking an OCP and you experience:

- severe headaches
- severe and unexplained pain in the chest, leg or stomach
- leg swelling
- difficulty breathing
- coughing up blood
- sudden problems with eyesight or speech
- weakness or numbness in an arm or leg
- fainting or collapse
- jaundice (yellowing skin or eyes)
- breast lumps
- swelling of lips, face or tongue.

For more information

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia

Listed under 'S' in the white pages of the phone book

Website www.shfpa.org.au

Your Body Guide

Website: www.understandingyou.com.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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