



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



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. Some Oral Contraceptive Pills (OCPs) can also relieve period problems and improve acne. OCPs must be prescribed by a doctor.

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
- Progestogen – only pills (POPs), which contain only one type of hormone.

Combined Oral Contraceptives – 'the Pill'

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

- Preventing ovulation (the release of an egg from the ovary)
- Thickening the mucus in the cervix so sperm cannot enter the uterus
- Changing the lining of the uterus (making it unsuitable for pregnancy).

As COCs change a woman's hormone balance, they can improve acne and reduce period problems. Some COCs can also relieve premenstrual symptoms, including premenstrual dysphoric disorder.

There are different types and brands of the Pill available in Australia. They differ in the amount of hormones and the type of progestogen they contain. These differences don't change how effective they are as contraceptives, but do lead to differences in health risks, side effects, costs and in their effect on premenstrual symptoms, period problems and acne.

All Pills are taken once a day, but the number of tablets provided per 28 day cycle varies between products. Some products provide 21 hormone tablets and 7 inactive tablets, some provide

21 hormone tablets only and one product provides 24 hormone tablets and 4 inactive tablets per 28 day cycle.

Benefits of COCs

For many women, benefits of taking the Pill include:

- It can be up to 99.7% effective as a contraceptive if taken correctly
- It does not interfere with sex
- Periods are more regular, shorter, lighter and less painful
- The timing of a period can be controlled
- Less premenstrual symptoms
- Less acne
- Lower 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, bloating, skin pigmentation and mid-cycle menstrual bleeding. COCs may also reduce breast milk production, so are unsuitable for women who are breastfeeding.

Health risks of COCs

COCs increase the risks of thrombosis (blood clots), heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, breast cancer and cervical cancer. They may not be suitable for women with certain medical conditions (e.g., cardiovascular disease, thrombosis, 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 still 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 mood changes. The Minipill may not be suitable for women with certain medical conditions (e.g., breast cancer, thrombosis, 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. You may need to use an additional form of contraception (e.g., condoms) in circumstances when your OCP may be less effective. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

- Read and follow the instruction 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, including complementary medicines (e.g., antibiotics, St. John’s wort).
- Ensure that the doctor who prescribes your OCP is aware of all your medical conditions.
- Have your blood pressure checked regularly.
- Don’t smoke.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Important

For reliable contraception, OCPs need to be taken once a day, at the same time each day. The timing of the Minipill dose is the most strict – if it is taken even 3 hours later than the usual time, additional contraception is needed for a further 48 hours.

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.

Related fact cards

- *Acne*
- *Contraception*
- *Menstrual Chart (website only – ask your pharmacist)*
- *Period Problems*

For more information

HEALTH/insite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia – listed under ‘S’ in the white pages of the phone book or website www.shfpa.org.au

Your Body Guide – website www.understandingyou.com.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

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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