

What are birth control pills?

Birth control pills are a medication you take every day to prevent pregnancy. They are sometimes called “the pill” or oral contraception. Most women using the pill take “combination pills.” These contain two hormones - estrogen and progestin.

Some birth control pills contain only one hormone - progestin. These are sometimes called “mini-pills”. Progestin-only pills are good for women who cannot use estrogen.

How effective are birth control pills?

If birth control pills are always used correctly, less than 1 out of 100 women using them will get pregnant each year. If they are not always used correctly, 8 out of 100 women using them will get pregnant each year.

Birth control pills work best if you take them at the same time every day. You might find it helpful to take the pill when you do something else every day — like brushing your teeth or eating dinner. This is very important with the progestin-only pill.

When you first start the pill, it takes several days to begin working. Be sure to use backup birth control (like a condom) for the first 7 days on the combination pill or 2 days with the progestin-only pill.

How do they work?

The hormones in the pill keep your ovaries from releasing eggs and thicken your cervical mucus to block sperm from getting into the uterus.

What are the benefits of using birth control pills?

- Birth control pills are safe, convenient, and very effective.
- You don't have to think about birth control each time you have sex.
- Most women can get pregnant quickly when they stop using the pill.
- Your periods may become lighter and less painful if you take the pill.
- The hormones in pills offer health benefits. The pill can offer some protection against acne, non-cancerous breast growths, ectopic pregnancy, endometrial and ovarian cancers, iron deficiency anemia, ovarian cysts, pelvic inflammatory disease, PMS symptoms, and menstrually-related migraine headaches.

What are the downsides of using birth control pills?

- Birth control pills do not protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- You need a prescription to get birth control pills. This requires a visit to a health care provider.
- Some women may have side effects while using birth control pills. They include bleeding between periods, breast tenderness, and nausea. Some of the most common side effects only last for the first few months.

- It is easy to forget to take the pill every day. You may need to use backup birth control or take emergency contraception if you miss a pill or take it late. Make sure to talk with your health care provider if you miss any pills.
- Women with certain health conditions should not use combination pills. Your healthcare provider will help you decide if the pill is right for you.

Where can I get birth control pills?

A health care provider can give you a prescription for birth control pills. You can purchase birth control pills at a drugstore, health center, or clinic with a prescription.

Where can I get more information?

For more information on the birth control pill, talk to your health care provider.

Compare the pill to other birth control options using ARHP's Method Match at www.arhp.org/MethodMatch.