

Guidelines for Taking the Combined Oral Birth Control Pill (Estrogen/Progesterone)

This handout explains the combined (estrogen/progesterone) oral birth control pill and how to take it. When used correctly, it is a safe and effective way to avoid getting pregnant. When taken as advised, the pill:

- Stops the ovary from releasing an egg.
- Thickens cervical mucus to stop the sperm from joining an egg.
- Changes the lining of the uterus.

Benefits

Taking the pill may:

- Make periods lighter, shorter, and with less cramping.
- Lower risk for ovarian and uterine cancer.
- Lower risk for ovarian cysts.
- Improve acne.
- Lower risk for benign breast conditions.
- Protect against osteoporosis, endometriosis, and rheumatoid arthritis.

How to Take the Birth Control Pill

- Take your pills as directed and at the **same time** every day.
- If your pack has 3 weeks worth of pills, complete the entire pack and wait 1 week before starting a new pack. During the week you are not taking pills, this is when you should have your period.
- **Do not** skip pills even if you are spotting or bleeding between periods.
- **Do not** skip pills if you feel nauseous. Try switching your pill to a different time of day or take with a light meal.

Talk to your provider about when your pill becomes effective at preventing pregnancy.

Taking Birth Control Continuously

This means you will take active pills only. You will skip the placebo (sugar) pills to avoid having a period.

If your pack has 4 weeks' worth of pills, take one active pill by mouth each day through the first 3 weeks of the pack. When you get to the 4th week (inactive pills), throw away the pack. Start the first active pill of the next pack.

Your provider will tell you how often you should take a break to have a withdrawal period.

Missed Birth Control Pills

Follow these steps if you missed birth control pills.

Missed 1 Pill (Within 24 Hours)

- Take the missed pill as soon as you remember.
- Take your next pill at the regular time.
- It is okay to take 2 pills at the same time if needed to catch up.
- You do not need a back-up birth control method if you miss 1 pill.

Missed 2 Pills (Within 48 Hours)

- Take the most recent missed pill right away.
- Throw away any earlier missed pills.
- Take your next pill at the regular time (you may take 2 pills at one time).

- Take the rest of the active pills in the pack on time.
- Skip the inactive pills and start a new pack the next day.
- Use condoms or **do not** have sex for the next 7 days. You are not protected from pregnancy until you take a pill every day for 7 days in a row.
- If you had unprotected sex since missing your pill, think about taking emergency birth control. It works up to 5 days after sex. You can get it from a pharmacy or call your provider for a prescription.

Missed More Than 2 Pills

Call your clinic for further instructions.

Pills and Your Periods

Your period should start by the third day of taking the inactive pills. Some people have some bleeding between periods, most often during the first three months of taking the pills. There is no reason to worry if you have been taking the pills as directed.

Call your clinic if you still have bleeding between periods after the first three months or if bleeding becomes heavy or lasts longer than normal.

You may skip a period while on the pill. This is not a concern if you have not missed any pills or taken pills late. If you miss two periods in a row, call your clinic.

Antibiotics

If you are taking antibiotics while on the pill, you may have some bleeding. A back-up form of birth control is not needed while on antibiotics. Call your clinic with concerns.

Risks

The pill **does not** protect you from sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

If you smoke while taking the pill, you are at an increased risk of stroke, heart attacks, and blood clotting problems.

Rare but serious side effects include increased risk for blood clots in legs, chest, and stroke.

When to Call

Contact your clinic or local ER right away if you have any of the **ACHES** symptoms of blood clots or stroke.

- Abdominal (stomach) pain that is severe or prolonged
- Chest pain or shortness of breath
- Severe Headaches
- Eye problems, like blurred vision, flashing lights or blindness
- Severe leg pains (calf or thighs)

Who to Call

If you have questions, please contact your provider through MyChart or call your provider listed in your After Visit Summary or After Hospital Care Plan. For a list of UW Health Clinics, please visit www.uwhealth.org/.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 7/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#4233