

# The Pill

## The Combined Pill – What is it?

The combined pill is made from two hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. The hormones in the pill are similar to naturally occurring oestrogen and progesterone hormones in the body. In this pamphlet, the combined pill is called 'the pill'.

## How does the Pill work?

It works in three ways:

1. It stops the body from releasing an ovum (egg) every month.
2. It changes the lining of the uterus (womb) so a fertilised egg cannot grow.
3. It makes the mucus in the cervix (the entrance to the womb) thicker, so sperm cannot get through.

## How do you take the Pill?

- In Australia most pill packets have 21 pills containing the two hormones (the active pills) and 7 pills containing only sugar. The sugar pills are included to keep a woman in the habit of taking a pill every day. Some countries have packets containing 21 active pills only and a seven day break is taken between packets.
- The instructions for taking the pill will vary according to the type of pill. Your doctor will explain how to commence taking your particular pill type.
- Generally you will be advised to take your first pill when you have your period.
- You should take a pill about the same time every day.
- You should take one pill every day until they are all gone, including the sugar pills.
- The day after you have taken the last pill, you should take the first pill of the new packet.
- You will have a 'period' (a withdrawal bleed) at the same time every month; this usually occurs one or two days after you start taking the sugar pills.

## When does the Pill start working?

- Usually when you start taking the pill, you need to take one active pill at the same time every day for seven days, before you are protected against pregnancy.
- However, some types of pill provide immediate protection, if started on the first day of your period.
- The doctor who starts you on the pill should explain when you are protected from pregnancy. If your doctor doesn't, you should ask.
- The pill will not protect you from sexually transmissible infections (STIs), so when you are taking the pill for contraception, you should also consider using condoms and dams.

## How effective is the Pill?

When you take the pill every day as instructed, your chances of falling pregnant are only 1% - 2%, i.e. the pill is 98% to 99% effective.

## **Are there times when you are not protected from getting pregnant?**

### **Late pills:**

As long as the pill is not more than 24 hours late, take it as soon as you remember and continue taking the pill daily at your usual time; this may mean you take two pills on one day. In this situation, you are protected from becoming pregnant.

### **Missed pills**

#### **If you miss taking a pill, and it is more than 24 hours after the due time**

1. Take the most recently missed pill as soon as you remember, and continue taking the pill daily at your usual time. This may mean you take two pills on one day. If you have missed several pills, do not take more than 2 pills on one day.
2. Use condoms until you have taken 7 active pills in a row.
  - If the missed pills were *in the last 7 days* of a cycle of active pills, skip all the sugar pills in this packet and start a new pill cycle with active pills. In this situation, you will miss a 'bleed'.
  - If you have missed one or more pills *in the first 7 active pills* of a cycle, and you have had unprotected sex within the last 5 days, (even if this was while you were taking your sugar pills), you need emergency contraception. Seek advice from your doctor, a family planning clinic or a pharmacy.
3. If you miss more than 4 active pills at any time, this means that you have really stopped taking the pill. You may need emergency contraception.

If you have vomiting or diarrhoea within 2 hours of taking the pill, it may not have been absorbed by your body. If you are concerned, seek advice.

Some antibiotics and other medications, including natural and/or herbal remedies may also interfere with the pill. If you are taking any of these, make sure that you discuss this with your doctor or ring a family planning clinic. Remember that if you are unsure whether you have followed the pill-taking instructions correctly, you should always use condoms as added protection against falling pregnant.

#### **What if I have sex and realise afterwards that I have missed pills?**

Emergency contraception should be considered as soon as possible. Check to see if you have broken the rules above. If you have, you may need emergency contraception. Seek advice from your doctor, a family planning clinic, or ask at a pharmacy. See the FPV Emergency Contraception pamphlet for additional information. Emergency contraception is now available in Australia, over the counter without a prescription, at pharmacies.

*If you are at all worried about whether you have taken the pill correctly, use condoms together with the pill until you have sought advice from your doctor or a family planning clinic.*

### **Are there other benefits from taking the Pill?**

- Your bleeding will be regular, every 28 days.
- Your bleeding will extend over fewer days, and there will be less of it.
- If you usually have period pain, there will be less pain.
- There is a decreased risk of cancer of the uterus and cancer of the ovaries.

### **Are there any problems with taking the Pill?**

1. Within the first 2 to 3 months of taking the pill you may experience:
  - bleeding or spotting between periods
  - feelings of nausea
  - breast soreness or tendernessThese will tend to settle with time.
2. Women who have uncontrolled high blood pressure or who smoke, should discuss taking the pill with their doctor before they start, due to the health risks.
3. More serious problems are rare. These include blood clots. If you experience severe headaches, chest pain, severe pain or swelling of one leg when on the pill, see a doctor immediately.
4. The pill will *not* protect you against sexually transmissible infections. Use condoms to protect yourself against STIs, especially with all new sexual partners.

### **Who should not take the Pill?**

- Some women who have had recent breast cancer, deep vein thrombosis (a blood clot), stroke, heart attack or focal migraines.
- Women with liver disease, and those taking certain medications, may be advised against it.
- Women who are smokers and over 35 years of age.

If you wish to take the pill, you must first see a doctor in order to get prescription. Your local or family planning clinic doctor will discuss this with you and help you decide if you should take the pill.

### **Will the Pill affect my fertility?**

Most women who want to have a baby will be fertile again, soon after stopping the pill. There is no long term effect of the pill on fertility.

*Remember...*

*Smoking is a health hazard. Giving up smoking is a good idea. It is an especially good idea when taking the pill or when you are pregnant.*

*You should follow the detailed instructions provided with your pill packet, and by your doctor. You should discuss any further questions with your doctor, or call your local family planning clinic.*



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