

Common Questions and Answers About Oral Contraceptives

Many women have heard rumors about oral contraceptives ("the pill"). They may be afraid to take the pill because they're not sure if it's safe or if it will cause unpleasant side effects. Here are the facts...

Is the pill dangerous?

No. Oral contraceptives have been available for 40 years. During that time, they have been studied extensively and improved many times. Today's pills are very safe and have few minor side effects. In fact, for most women, taking the pill is much safer than having a baby.

What are the side effects?

Taking the pill may cause nuisance side effects that vary from woman to woman. For some women, small amounts of bleeding may occur between periods (breakthrough bleeding), especially during the first 3 months. This effect is not harmful and usually disappears after a few months. Missing pills can also be followed by breakthrough bleeding. During the first month or so, some women may have nausea (upset stomach) after taking the pill, although this occurs infrequently. Taking the pill just before going to bed can help control this problem.

Does the pill cause breast cancer?

A group of experts recently examined data from all over the world regarding breast cancer and oral contraceptives. They found that use of the pill does not increase the long-term risk of breast cancer. Women currently using the pill had a very slightly increased risk of breast cancer being diagnosed, but that finding is likely due to more frequent and careful screening.

Does the pill cause other cancers?

Pill use actually decreases the risk of cancer of the lining of the uterus and cancer of the ovary. Some studies have suggested that long-term pill use might increase the risk of cervical cancer; however, this is not proven. All women should have regular Pap smears to look for changes in the cervix.

Does the pill cause heart attacks or strokes?

No. There is no increase in the risk of heart attack or stroke among healthy pill users who do not smoke cigarettes. Smoking is far more dangerous than taking the pill.

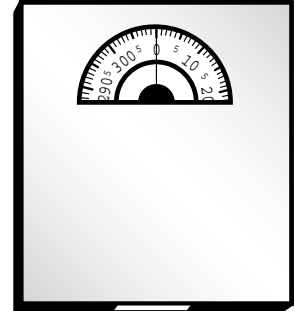


Does the pill cause blood clots?

Pills may cause a small increase in the risk of blood clots, but the risk of clots is much less than during pregnancy. Blood clots among healthy women are rare.

Will the pill make me gain weight?

The pill does not make you fat. Most women who take the pill do not experience a change in weight.



Will the pill make my face break out?

Some women have worried that the pill might cause acne (pimples). The truth is that most of today's pills usually help clear up existing acne for most women.

Does the pill cause birth defects?

No. The pill does not affect the health of future children or cause birth defects, even in the unusual event when a woman gets pregnant while taking the pill.

Will the pill make me infertile?

No. A woman's fertility usually returns soon after stopping the pill.

Do I need to stop taking the pill every so often to give my body a "rest?"

No. There is no medical reason for taking a "rest" from oral contraceptive use. In fact, stopping and restarting the pill increases the risk of unplanned pregnancy.

Does the pill work for a few months after I stop taking it?

No. A woman needs to take a pill each day because there is only enough hormone in the pill for 1 day. As soon as you stop taking it, the birth control effect ends and you could become pregnant. You should always speak with your clinician before stopping the pill.

Are there benefits to taking the pill other than preventing pregnancy?

Yes. The pill has many health-related benefits. Women who use oral contraceptives have more regular menstrual periods, lighter bleeding, and fewer menstrual cramps. In addition to protecting women against two cancers, oral contraceptives reduce the risk of developing noncancerous breast cysts, infections of the fallopian tubes requiring hospitalization, and iron deficiency anemia (low blood count). The pill also protects against pregnancies that occur outside the uterus (tubal or ectopic pregnancy).

