

Using Oral Contraceptives to Treat Medical Conditions

Why are oral contraceptives sometimes prescribed for medical problems?

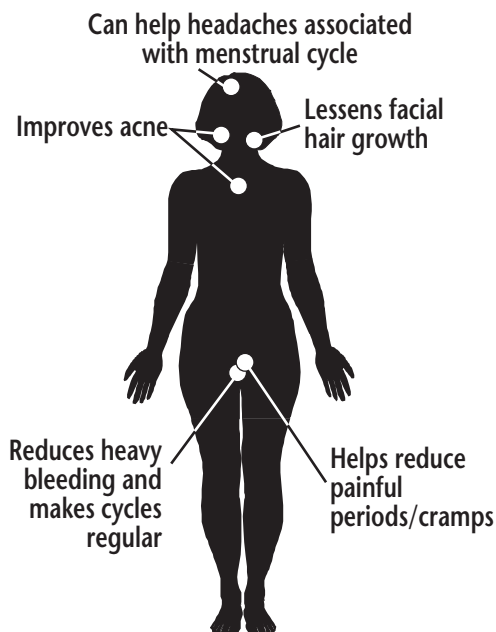
Oral contraceptives (the “birth control pill”) have many health benefits beyond just preventing pregnancy. Medical researchers have been studying the pill for more than 40 years. They have discovered a number of ways oral contraceptives can be used to treat health problems. Because the pill contains hormones that affect your menstrual cycle (making your periods more regular and making you bleed less), it can be used to treat many conditions related to your period.

What are some of the conditions the pill might be used to treat?

Your clinician might prescribe the pill for many different medical problems. Some of these problems are common; others are rare or only affect certain women. Here are some of the conditions oral contraceptives might be used to treat:

Painful periods/cramps: Many women get painful cramps around the time of their period. This problem is very common among teenagers — up to 60% of teenage girls have painful periods. For some, the pain may be so strong that they have to stay home and miss school or work. Many over-the-counter (nonprescription) and prescription pain relievers can help women who have cramps. Birth control pills are often prescribed for teens and adult women who have painful periods.

Oral Contraceptives Can Help Several Medical Conditions



Heavy or irregular periods: Heavy bleeding during periods or irregular periods are common in adult women and especially common in teenagers. In addition to being inconvenient, heavy, irregular, or prolonged periods can cause your body to lose iron, an important mineral found in the blood. Oral contraceptives are frequently prescribed to treat this condition. Women on birth control pills usually bleed only half as much during their periods as women who are not taking the pill and have much more regular menstrual cycles.

Acne (“zits” or “breaking out”): Acne is another problem that is common among teenagers — nearly four out of five teens have this problem. Acne usually consists of pimples, blackheads, or whiteheads. Severe cases of acne can cause permanent scars. Although acne usually improves after the teenage years, some adults in their 20s, 30s, and even 40s get acne. Mild-to-moderate acne can be treated with a variety of over-the-counter products, such as lotions and creams containing benzoyl peroxide. Many acne treatments are available by prescription. The overall hormonal effect of the birth control pill helps prevent acne from forming, which is why the pill often is used to treat moderate-to-severe acne.

Too much hair growth: Some women's bodies produce a slight excess of male hormones, called androgens, that may cause them to grow hair in unwanted places, such as on the face. The birth control pill reduces the amount of androgens your body produces and helps avoid unwanted hair growth. Using the pill won't make unwanted hair go away — only help to keep new hair growth from happening. Other treatments, such as electrolysis ("zapping" hairs with electricity), laser, waxing, and depilatories (hair remover creams) can help you get rid of existing unwanted hair.

Other conditions: If you have had ovarian cysts, you might be given the pill to help keep new ones from forming. Your clinician might also prescribe the pill to help with symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS), such as mood changes or migraine headaches. A small number of women also have blood disorders that the pill can help treat.

What do I need to know if I'm taking the pill for something other than birth control?

If your clinician prescribes the pill for something other than birth control, he or she will explain to you exactly how it should be taken. Using the pill to treat certain conditions might require that you take your pills differently from what is printed in the instructions. For example, you might need to take several pills each day or continue taking "active" pills during times when you would normally be taking "inactive" ones. Your clinician will give you specific instructions, depending upon the condition.

A Special Message to Teens

Many medical conditions that the pill is used to treat are especially common among teenagers. For example, teens are more likely to have irregular or heavy periods. Teenagers often get menstrual cramps. You are also more likely to get acne in your teenage years.

Your clinician might prescribe birth control pills for these problems. For some teenagers, this may seem a little uncomfortable — especially if you're not sexually active. You might be worried about how your friends or family will react if they find out you're using "the pill." The best advice is not to think of it as the birth control pill. It's really your "hormone medication." It's a treatment, just like antibiotics or any other medicine.

For More Information

To learn more about medical conditions that birth control pills might be used to treat, contact:

Center for Young Women's Health, Children's Hospital

300 Longwood Ave., Box 310, Boston, MA 02115

Telephone: 1-617-355-2994

Web site: <http://www.youngwomenshealth.org>

Endometriosis Association

8585 North 76th Place, Milwaukee, WI 53223

Telephone: 1-800-992-3636

Web site: <http://www.endometriosisassn.org>

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association

P.O. Box 7007,

Rosemont, IL 60018

Telephone: 1-630-585-3690

Web sites: <http://www.pcosupport.org>

<http://www.pcoteen.org>