

Patient Information:

## Oral Contraception: Questions and Answers

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### *What are the types of oral contraceptives (OCs)?*

#### **The Combination Pill** (progestin and estrogen)

is the pill most commonly prescribed at this time. Dosage: Low dose estrogen pills are most often prescribed by Schiffert Health Center (SHC). They contain 20 to 35 micrograms of estrogen.

**Packaging:** There are 21 and 28 day packs. SHC uses the 28s.

- A. 28 day packs contain 28 pills - 21 pills containing a combination of estrogen and progestin and 7 pills with no active ingredient (placebos—sugar pills). The placebos are to help you remember to take a pill each day. Menstruation will occur sometime during the week of placebos. You start a new pack when the placebos are gone.
- B. 21 day packs simply have 21 pills. They are the same as the 28s except the placebos are missing, so you take 7 days off and then begin a new pack.
- C. Some pills have less than 7 placebo pills and must be taken to insure effectiveness. Be sure to follow the pack's specific instructions.

#### **The Mini-Pill** (progestin only)

is a pill taken every day without any days off. It is not particularly good at regulating menstruation. It is not as effective as the combination pill.

### *How do oral contraceptives work?*

OCs are made of hormones similar to the human female hormones, estrogen and progesterone. OCs work primarily by regulating hormone levels to inhibit ovulation and by producing thick cervical secretions which act as a physical barrier against sperm. They also thin the lining of the uterus decreasing the possibility of implantation if fertilization were to occur.

- ◆ Abstain or use another method of birth control

the first month that you are taking the pill.

- ◆ Condoms should always be used with the pill as a protection against sexually transmissible diseases including HIV/AIDS.

### *When do you start oral contraceptives?*

There are two ways of starting OCs. Always follow the method your health care provider prescribes for you.

#### **Method #1:**

Start taking the pills the first Sunday **after the first day of menstruation** (which is the first day you start bleeding). For example, if your menstrual flow starts on: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday or Saturday, then begin taking the 1st pill on Sunday. If the first day of menstruation is Sunday, start your pill that day. Take one pill each day at the same time for 21 days. Then take the 7 placebos. Menstruation usually occurs sometime during the week on the placebos. After the 7 days of placebos, begin a new pack whether you are bleeding or not. This start method produces more "period-free weekends" than method #2.

#### **Method #2:**

Begin your pack of pills during the first 24 hours of the start of your menstrual period (which is the first day you start bleeding.). From then on the instructions are the same as in method #1.

### *What are the side effects of oral contraceptives?*

Some of the common side effects of using OCs are not dangerous and usually disappear after one to three months of taking OCs:

1. Weight gain (3 to 5 pounds)
2. Light bleeding or spotting between periods
3. Changes in menstrual flow (usually much lighter)
4. Spotty darkening of the facial skin (may be permanent)
5. Depression, mood changes

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6. Mild headaches which may be relieved by a daily multivitamin
7. Breast tenderness
8. Nausea - when first beginning OCs a few users will experience nausea

### ***What are the warning signs that I might be having a problem with oral contraceptives?***

<b>Signals:</b>	<b>Possible Problems:</b>
<b>A</b> Abdominal Pain	Gall Bladder Disease
<b>C</b> Chest Pain or Shortness of Breath	Blood Clot in Lungs or Heart Attack
<b>H</b> Headaches	Stroke or High Blood Pressure
<b>E</b> Eye Problems (blurred vision, flashing lights, blindness)	Stroke or High Blood Pressure
<b>S</b> Severe Leg Pain	Blood Clot

**SEE A PHYSICIAN IMMEDIATELY FOR ANY OF THESE SYMPTOMS!**

### ***What are the advantages and disadvantages of using oral contraceptives?***

#### **Advantages:**

1. Highly effective
2. No interruption of sexual spontaneity
3. Lighter menstrual flow and less cramping
4. Approximately 50% reduction in risk of uterine or ovarian cancer

#### **Disadvantages:**

1. Possible side effects
2. Must take at the same time each day (every 24 hours)

### ***Which drugs are incompatible with oral contraceptives?***

Always tell any health care provider caring for you that you are taking OCs since prescription medications may interfere with the OCs or the OCs may interfere with the other medicine's effectiveness.

### ***What is breakthrough bleeding and why does it happen?***

Breakthrough bleeding is bleeding occurring at times other than during the placebos.

It can occur when you are becoming adjusted to taking the pills for the first time or if you have been off them for a time and are beginning them again. Even if you take them properly at the same time each day, you may have bleeding. This is an adjustment situation and not serious. If it continues into the third month of pills you may need to have your practitioner prescribe another pill brand.

If you miss a pill or take it too late, bleeding may occur. Take a pill as soon as you remember that you missed one. Pick a time of day that you think you can take the pill each day. Taking it within no more than one hour before or after the time you pick will help prevent breakthrough bleeding and increase the product's effectiveness. Try setting your cell phone or watch alarm as a reminder. If you don't like the time of day you've chosen to take your pill, it's best to adjust the time with a new pill pack.

When you have been doing well on OCs for a while (taking a pill at the same time every day), with no breakthrough bleeding, and suddenly develop breakthrough bleeding you should see your practitioner for evaluation. (You should also use a backup method if you have been experiencing diarrhea and/or vomiting.)

### ***How do I manage breakthrough bleeding?***

If it is only light spotting continue to take the pill but don't trust it for birth control. If it is heavy bleeding, like a menstrual period, stop the pills, and throw that package away. Use a backup method. Begin a new pack the next Sunday provided you have had three days to menstruate. If you haven't had three days, begin the Sunday after next. If you experience breakthrough

**IMPORTANT NOTE! ANYTIME YOU ARE TAKING A MEDICINE WHICH MAY INTERFERE WITH THE PILL (SUCH AS ANTIBIOTICS), CONSIDER YOURSELF AT INCREASED RISK OF PREGNANCY, AND USE AN ADDITIONAL METHOD OF BIRTH CONTROL SUCH AS ABSTINENCE, OR CONDOMS AND SPERMICIDE WHILE TAKING THE MEDICATIONS AND FOR 7 DAYS AFTER.**

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bleeding after you have been on OCs for a while, *and* you have been taking all the pills on time, you may have an infection and need to be checked by a health care provider. Call the Women's Clinic for an appointment.

### ***What if you skip a period?***

If you miss one or more pills and skip a period, you should be checked for a possible pregnancy. Occasionally you will miss a period even though all pills were taken correctly. If this occurs, continue taking the pills as usual. The possibility of pregnancy is highly unlikely. If two periods are missed, call the Women's Clinic for an appointment to have a pregnancy test done. Bring the first urine specimen of the morning in a clean container. Do not drink anything after midnight. Have a pregnancy test performed two weeks after the missed period. Be aware that the test may still be negative in early pregnancy, so expect to have another test performed two weeks later. Make an appointment to see a health care provider in the Women's Clinic.

### ***Are oral contraceptives suitable for all women?***

Women with the following conditions should not use OCs:

- ◆ Pregnancy, suspected pregnancy, nursing mothers
- ◆ Blood clotting disorders, strokes, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol
- ◆ Cancer of the breast or sex organs
- ◆ Unexplained vaginal bleeding between periods

#### **IMPORTANT NOTE!**

**THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS, SO DISCUSS ANY CONCERNS WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER. ALL WOMEN MUST HAVE A MEDICAL EXAMINATION BEFORE OCs WILL BE PRESCRIBED.**

### ***What you need to know about getting an Oral Contraceptive prescription....***

After completing an annual exam including a pelvic exam, a health care provider may prescribe OCs for women considered to be good candidates. A prescription for 12 months will be written by the SHC health care provider and may be filled at the SHC pharmacy or any pharmacy of your choice.