

Starting Oral Contraceptives



**Important information for using
birth control so that it's effective.**



4300 N. BRANDYWINE DR • PEORIA, IL 61614 • P 309.692.0123 • F 309.692.0184

DRKNIGHT@THEKNIGHTCENTER.COM • WWW.THEKNIGHTCENTER.COM

STARTING ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES

Dr. Knight adapted much of this from Planned Parenthood, plus a few tidbits of her own.

HOW DO BIRTH CONTROL PILLS PREVENT PREGNANCY?

The primary method is by taking a pill containing hormones (estrogen and progestin), your body sees those hormones and stops or lowers the signals that trigger normal cycle and ovulation. This inhibits the release of the egg or ovulation. With no egg floating around there is no egg for the sperm to fertilize. It also has a secondary effect that also lowers fertility and that is it changes cervical mucus. Mucus is sticky and thick and traps sperm or blocks their entry to the cervix.

What are the different types of birth control pills?

There are 2 types of birth control pills (combination pills and progestin-only pills), and many different brands.

COMBINATION PILLS (COCs):

Combination pills have 2 hormones: estrogen and progestin. These are the most common type of birth control pill.

As long as you take 1 pill every day, you'll be protected from pregnancy. You don't have to take your combination pill at the exact same time every day. But taking it at the same time is a good idea because it helps keep you in the habit of remembering your pill.

PROGESTIN-ONLY PILLS (aka Mini Pills):

Progestin-only pills have 1 kind of hormone (progestin) — these pills don't have any estrogen. You must take progestin-only pills within the same 3 hours every day to be protected from pregnancy. These are less effective than combination pills but typically used by mothers that are breast feeding or those that get migraines from estrogen.

HOW DO I USE BIRTH CONTROL PILLS?

Combination Pills (COCs):

As long as you take 1 pill every day, you'll be protected from pregnancy. You don't have to take your combination pill at the exact same time every day. But taking it at the same time is a good idea because it helps keep you in the habit of remembering your pill. You can also use an alarm, calendar reminder, or a birth control app to help you remember. Most combination pills come in 28-day or 21-day packs. There are even 24-day packs (technically they have 24 active pills vs 21 active pills, and they're better for

reducing PMS.)

Period Tracker and Birth Control Reminder App: <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/get-care/spot-on-period-tracker>

If you have 28-day packs:

Take 1 pill every day for 28 days (four weeks) in a row, and then start a new pack on day 29. The last pills in 28-day packs of combination pills do not have hormones in them. These pills are called "reminder" or "placebo" pills — they help remind you to take your pill every day and start your next pack on time. How many days you take hormone-free reminder pills depends on the brand of pill. ***Most pill packs have hormone-free pills for 7 days, but sometimes there are less (i.e. the 24-day version has only 4 placebos).*** The reminder pills may contain iron or other supplements. You get your period during the week you take these reminder pills. You'll still be protected from pregnancy even if you don't take the reminder pills — just remember to start your next pack on time and be sure you're aware of which ones are "blanks".

Another tip, if you are one of the rare people that has a short cycle, like I did, I had a period off the pill every 21-24 days, that means you can possibly ovulate on day 7 so you would want a 24 days of active pills type of OCP. I got pregnant multiple times while taking birth control correctly and figured this out after the fact. That's why condoms are a good idea because nothing is 100% effective and OCPs don't protect you from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).

If you have 21-day packs:

Take 1 pill every day for 21 days (3 weeks) in a row. Then don't take any pills for seven days (week 4). You'll get your period during the fourth week while you aren't taking any pills. It's important to take every pill in a 21-day pack because there is no reminder (hormone-free) pills. The hormone pills will prevent pregnancy even if you have sex during the week when you don't take any pills. Start your next pack after not taking your pills for 7 days — you may want to use an alarm or reminder to help you stay on track.

If you have 91-day packs:

Some combination pills have 12 weeks (3 months) of hormone pills in a row, followed by up to 1 week of hormone-free reminder pills. This is so you'll only have your period once every 3 months. The hormones will prevent pregnancy even if you have sex during the reminder pill week. You can also use other pill brands to skip your period by skipping the reminder pills. Read more about how to use pills to skip your period below.

Progestin-Only Pills (aka Mini Pills):

You must take progestin-only pills within the same 3 hours every day to be protected from pregnancy. For example, if you take your progestin-only pill at 12:00 p.m., taking it after 3:00 p.m. the next day puts

you at risk for pregnancy. Alarms, reminders, or birth control apps can help you take your pill on time.

Progestin-only pills only come in 28-day (4 week) packs. All 28 pills have hormones. You must take every pill in a progestin-only pack to be protected from pregnancy — there is no hormone-free week. You may get your period during the fourth week. You could also have bleeding on and off throughout the month (spotting) or get no period at all.

HOW DO I START TAKING THE PILL?

You can start taking birth control pills as soon as you get them — any day of the week, and anytime during your menstrual cycle. But when you'll be protected from pregnancy depends on when you start and the kind of pill you're using. You may need to use a backup birth control method (like condoms) for up to the first 7 days.

However, I have found that doing this leads to more spotting the first 3 months or break through bleeding. If you aren't currently sexually active and have more than a month before you will be then it's easier to get your body to adapt to the pill if you start it the next Sunday after you start your period. Or if you start your period on a Sunday then start the same day. You can also start it the same day you start regardless of what day of the week you start and if you do it's immediately effective. My method of starting on the Sunday is so that your period will typically occur during the week and be done and not occur on the weekend. If this is confusing, then easiest is to start on the first day of your next period. If you have a date coming up such as your wedding day and you want to be sure to not be on your period then or during a honeymoon, then email me your last menstrual period 1st day of bleeding and the upcoming dates and I can tell you how to best avoid that situation. I can't guarantee it, especially if it's sooner than 2-3 months.

BUT DON'T delay starting if you are already sexually active. Just start it right away and I'll tell you later how to change when you have your period if it's typically falling on the weekend.

Combination Pills (COCs):

You can start the combination pill at any time.

If you start taking combination pills within 5 days after your period starts, you'll be protected from pregnancy right away. For example, if you get your period Monday morning, you can start the pill anytime until Saturday morning and be protected from pregnancy right away.

If you start combination pills any other time, you need to take the pill for 7 days before you're protected from pregnancy. Use another method of birth control — like a condom — if you have penis-in-vagina sex during the first week on the pill. Trust me penis near the vagina isn't even safe if ejaculation occurs and lands near by the boys can swim.

Progestin-Only Pills (Mini Pills):

You can start progestin-only pills at any time. You'll be protected from pregnancy after 48 hours (2 days) on the pill. If you have penis-in-vagina sex during those first 2 days, use another method of birth control,

like a condom.

You must take progestin-only pills at the same time every day. If you take it more than 3 hours past your usual time, use a backup method of birth control for the next 48 hours (2 days).

Starting the Pill After Pregnancy:

You can get pregnant again shortly after being pregnant, so talk with your nurse or doctor about starting your birth control as soon as you can.

You can start taking the progestin-only pill right after an abortion, miscarriage, or childbirth.

You can start taking the combination pill right after an abortion or miscarriage. In general, you can start taking the combination pill 3 weeks after giving birth, but you should wait 3 weeks whether you're breastfeeding or not. Read more about breastfeeding and birth control pills. In general, contraceptives decrease milk production but don't believe the old wives' tale that breast feeding prevents pregnancy, it reduces the risk but it's not even close to 100%. Plenty of women got pregnant while still nursing. Nursing moms should wait 6 weeks to 6 months before starting contraception and most take the progestin only pill.

HOW DO I USE THE PILL TO STOP MY PERIOD?

Skipping your period with the pill is safe and super easy with combination pills. Basically, you just take a pill with hormones every day and skip your hormone-free “reminder” pills. You can do this two ways:

1. You can use a brand of pills that has 3 months of hormone pills in a row, so you only get your period 4 times a year.
2. You can skip the hormone-free reminder pills in your pack and jump right to the next pack. You can do this every month, or just whenever you want to skip your period.

You may have some bleeding or spotting when you use the pill to skip your period — that's totally normal. If you skip your hormone-free week every month, the spotting should go away after about 6 months. There's nothing dangerous or harmful about using the pill to skip your period. And it comes in really handy if you want a special occasion (like a vacation or a hot date) to be period-free.

WHAT DO I DO IF I MISS A PILL?

The pill works best if you take it every day on schedule, but almost everyone on the pill forgets to take it sometimes. Knowing what to do when you miss a birth control pill is important. Generally, if you go to take your pill and then discover you didn't take it yesterday then take one now and another one in 12 hours. If you forget it 2 days in a row, you take two now and one in 12 hours but also use condoms for the next 7 days to prevent pregnancy because the pill is not effective when you miss it for 48 hours.

Here's a handy tool to help you figure out what to do if you miss a pill.

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/online-tools/missed-birth-control-pill>

You'll need to know the brand name of the pill you're on in order to use this tool. You can find the name on your pill pack or by calling your doctor or the drugstore where you got it.

If you can't find out the name of your pill, use a condom anytime you have vaginal sex until you can talk with your nurse or doctor. If you've already had sex in the last 5 days since making a pill mistake, you may want to use emergency contraception. You can also use your remaining pills as a form of emergency contraception. To do that you take 2 pills now and 2 pills in 12 hours. If you're on a very low dose OCP (less than 30 mcg of ethinyl estradiol), then take 3 pills now and 3 pills in 12 hours. This needs to be done within 48-72 hours of unprotected intercourse to be effective.

What do I do if I want to get pregnant?

If you decide you want to get pregnant, just stop taking the pill. No matter what kind of birth control pill you're on, it's possible to get pregnant right after you stop taking it. It can take a few months for your period to go back to the cycle you had before you started taking the pill, but you can still get pregnant during that time.

What side effects should I expect while taking the pill?

Taking the pill may cause some side effects. One of the most important things to keep in mind is that most side effects usually go away in 2-3 months after you start the pill.

Some people have headaches, nausea, sore breasts, or spotting (light bleeding between periods) after starting the pill. These birth control side effects usually clear up after a couple of months. If you still don't like the way the pill makes you feel after a few months, talk with your nurse or doctor. They may suggest another brand of pill or a different birth control method. Some people try a few different types of pills or methods before finding the right one for them.

Taking the pill may change your period. Your period may be lighter, and sometimes you might not get one at all (especially if you've been taking the pill continuously to skip your periods). As long as you're using the pill correctly, it's really unlikely that you'll get pregnant. But if you miss a period and you're worried about pregnancy, you can always take a pregnancy test just to be sure.

Any serious side effects?

There is a very small risk of thrombosis, typically a deep vein thrombosis or leg clot, that can occur from taking an oral contraceptive. It feels like a leg cramp that you can't stretch. If you think you have a leg clot you stop the pill and go to an ER or the office right away.

Some people also get migraines or worse migraines. Migraines are often triggered by the withdrawal of the hormones so if that happens please see Dr. Knight, we have a remedy for that, and you still can take the pill. BUT if they trigger migraines at the beginning of the pill pack then I suggest considering a different method.

Remember, you can always call us if you have any concerns while using the pill or email me at drknight@theknightcenter.com.