



Combined Oral Contraceptives

What are combined oral contraceptives?

- Combined oral contraceptives, also known as birth control pills, are a common method of contraception.
- Combined oral contraceptives contain synthetic forms of the 2 female hormones, estrogen and progesterone.

What are the benefits of combined oral contraceptives?

While combined oral contraceptives are primarily used to prevent pregnancy, they have other benefits as well including:

- Make your periods more regular and easier to predict
- Reduce period cramps
- Make your period lighter with less blood loss and a lower risk of anemia
- Improve acne
- Reduce risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer

How should I take my combined oral contraceptive?

- Combined oral contraceptives can be used in a few different ways based on the pack:
 - 21-pill pack: This pack contains hormone pills only. Take the hormone pills once daily for 3 weeks, and then take no pills for 1 week. During this hormone-free break, you may have a period.
 - 28-pill pack: This pack contains hormone pills and non-hormone pills (also known as sugar or placebo pills). Depending on the pack, there will be either 7 or 4 non-hormone pills. Take your pills daily. During this hormone-free break, you may have a period.
- Sometimes your healthcare provider will prescribe for you to take the pill continuously so you do not have a hormone-free break and do not get a period. Your healthcare provider will help you decide on a regimen that best fits your preferences.
- It is very important that you take your pill at the same time each day. Some tips to remember to take your pill include setting a reminder on your phone or taking your pill with the same meal each day.

When should I start using my combined oral contraceptive?

- You can start taking your pills the day you pick them up from the pharmacy, regardless of where you are in your menstrual cycle. Another method of contraception (called back-up contraception) is required for 7 days when you first get started. Back-up contraception can include using barrier contraceptives such as condoms.

What side effects should I expect while taking my combined oral contraceptive?

- Here are some of the more common side effects of combined oral contraceptives. Usually these side effects will disappear within the first few months of use. If they do not go away or become bothersome, talk to your healthcare provider.
 - Nausea
 - Headache
 - Water retention/weight gain
 - Mood changes
 - Breakthrough bleeding (spotting)
 - Breast tenderness
 - Acne
- Some of the less common side effects include an increased risk of blood clots, but this is very rare. This risk is the highest when you first start using combined oral contraceptives, or when you restart after not taking it for more than a month. Talk to your healthcare provider immediately if you experience any of the following:
 - Pain in legs or chest
 - Severe headache
 - Swelling in legs or arms
 - Unexplained shortness of breath
 - Numbness in legs or arms
 - Sudden loss/change in vision

What should I do if I forget to take my combined oral contraceptive?

- If it has been **less than 24 hours** since you forgot to take your pill:
 - Take the pill as soon as you remember. Take your next pill at the regularly scheduled time and continue to take it daily.
- If it has been **more than 24 hours (one day)** since you forgot to take your pill:
 - If you have missed your pill for more than 24 hours refer to the following chart.
 - To use the chart, you need to find out what week of the pack you are currently using, the number of pills you have missed, and how long it has been since you last took a pill.
 - The chart will tell you if you need to use 7 days of back-up contraception (e.g. condoms) if you miss a pill. It also tells you if you need to use emergency contraception (e.g. Plan B) if you had unprotected intercourse in the past 5 days.

Time of Missed Pill	Number of Missed Pills and What to do	Need for Back-up Contraception or Emergency Contraception
Week 1 of pack	If 1 or more pills are missed, take 1 of the missed pills right away. Take your next pill at the regularly scheduled time This may mean 2 pills in one day.	Yes
Week 2 or 3 of pack	If 1-2 pills are missed, take 1 of the missed pills right away. Take your next pill at the regularly scheduled time. This may mean 2 pills in one day. Continue the pack until the end of the hormone pills, then start a new pack without a hormone-free break.	No
	If 3 or more pills are missed, take 1 of the missed pills right away. Take your next pill at the regularly scheduled time. This may mean 2 pills in one day. Continue the pack until the end of the hormone pills, then start a new pack without a hormone-free break.	Yes

Note: This chart only applies if you take a hormone-free break by not taking any pills or by taking sugar pills once a month. If you take hormone pills continuously without a break, contact your healthcare provider for instructions if you miss a dose. If you are unsure of what to do if you miss a pill, visit www.sexandu.ca/sos/ or contact your healthcare provider.

Do I need to take my combined oral contraceptive with food?

- Combined oral contraceptives are taken once a day with or without food. If you experience nausea, try taking your pill with food.

How should I store my combined oral contraceptive?

- Store your pills at room temperature away from heat/humidity. Keep away from children.

How can I protect myself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

- Combined oral contraceptives do not protect you from STIs.
- The only way to prevent the transmission of STIs is by using condoms each time you have intercourse.

Notes:

This material is for informational purposes only. It does not replace the advice or counsel of a doctor or health care provider. Please consult with your doctor, pharmacist or other health care provider for further information.