

Oral contraceptives or birth control pills were approved for use in the U.S. in 1960. The birth control pill revolutionized contraception. For the first time, women had an option that allowed for spontaneity of intercourse, was easy to use, and was highly effective. This pamphlet is designed to present information on pills containing estrogen and a progestin. This pamphlet does not include information about progestin-only pills, better known as “mini-pills”. It is important to note that the goal of this pamphlet is strictly education. This pamphlet is **not** intended to serve as a substitute for the informational inserts that accompany pills. Women are **strongly** encouraged to review these inserts.

How do oral contraceptives work?

Oral contraceptives (OCs) work to prevent pregnancy in three ways.

1. The primary way in which OCs work is by suppressing ovulation. Eggs are not released from the ovary, therefore when sperm travel up the reproductive tract, there is not an egg to fertilize.
2. OCs alter the lining of the uterus, compromising the ability of a fertilized egg to implant itself.
3. OCs increase the thickness of the cervical mucus, hampering the sperm's ability to get into the upper reproductive tract.

Effectiveness

Typical user failure rate is 3%, meaning that if 100 women used oral contraceptives for one year, three of them would experience an accidental pregnancy. The key to the effectiveness of oral contraceptives is for women to remember to take their pill approximately the same time every day within a two hour period.

Cost

Costs vary tremendously. The ECU Student Health Service (SHS) pharmacy offers a wide variety of different OC brands for a significantly reduced cost. Call 328-6794 to inquire about current charges. Other than SHS, pills can range in cost from \$12 to \$38 per pill pack at any retail pharmacy. The following brands are available at the SHS pharmacy: Triphasil, Lo-Ovral, Loestrin Orthocyclen, Ortho-tricyclen, Alesse & Estrostep.

What are the advantages of taking OCs?

- Highly effective method of contraception when used consistently and correctly.
- Unless there is a medical reason why a woman cannot take pills, she can usually continue taking them throughout her reproductive years. There is a common belief that women need a break from OCs, especially if they have been on them for a long time. Unless a health care provider indicates otherwise, women are encouraged to continue pill use without breaks.

- Pill use does not cause infertility. After women discontinue taking OCs, fertility usually returns within 3 to 6 months. Pill use actually decreases the risks of pelvic inflammatory disease, endometrial cancer, ectopic pregnancy, and ovarian cysts—all causes of infertility.
- Reduces menstrual cramps, helps regulate the menstrual cycle, shortens the menstrual period, and creates lighter menstrual flows, thus reducing the likelihood of anemia (iron deficiency).
- May help prevent osteoporosis.
- Decreases the risk of benign (non-cancerous) breast disease. The link between breast cancer and pill use is still not substantiated. Some studies suggest a link, while others have disproved a link.

What are the disadvantages of taking OCs?

The following list of disadvantages serves as a general outline and is not inclusive. Read the pill inserts to become familiar with all disadvantages and adverse side effects.

- Pills must be taken daily. It is easy to forget to take a pill. Women are encouraged to coordinate pill taking with another activity such as brushing teeth, a meal time, or preparing to go to bed. When pill use is inconsistent, failure rates will rise.
- The most serious potential complication of OCs is an increased risk of cardiovascular problems. These complications are rare in pill users; however, OCs combined with risk factors such as smoking, diabetes, obesity,

elevated cholesterol levels or high blood pressure increase the risk of blood clotting, heart attack or stroke.

- Depression and mood changes may occur.
- The most common side effects of OCs include increased breast size and tenderness, fluid retention, weight gain, and acne or oily skin.
- Headaches may become more common.
- Nausea or vomiting may occur in the first few cycles, but usually subsides after one to three months of pill use. Women may take their pill in the evening to sleep this effect off.
- Some women experience unwanted menstrual changes such as missed periods, scanty bleeding or spotting.
- OCs provide **NO** protection against STIs including HIV. Pill users concerned about avoiding an STI are encouraged to use condoms in conjunction with the pill.

Remember that if side effects are disrupting the quality of your life, and they do not seem to improve, call your health care provider and explain your side effects. It may be possible to switch your brand of OCs.

Source:

Hatcher, et al. (1998). Contraceptive Technology. 17th edition.

What is the process for taking OCs?

All women should read the informational insert that accompanies their pills. Pill packs may vary slightly so it is important for women to be familiar with their particular brand. The list that follows offers general guidelines for taking pills.

- Try to take your pill the same time every day.
- Select a back-up method of contraception and learn how to correctly use it. Abstinence or a back-up method which may include male or female condoms, diaphragms, and spermicide. There are times when OCs may not provide full protection. Back-up methods of contraception are generally recommended when switching OC prescriptions, when certain prescription medications are taken, if you are experiencing vomiting and/or diarrhea, and during the first month of pill use.
- Start taking pills on the day your health care provider recommends.
- A pill pack from the ECU Student Health Service will contain 28 pills per pack. Take one pill per day (about the same time every day) until you finish the pack. Begin your new pack immediately. Skip no days between packs.
- The last 7 pills of a 28 day pack are inert pills, meaning they have no active ingredients. The purpose of these pills is to allow shedding of the uterine lining, and to maintain the habit of remembering to take a pill every day.

What do you do if you forget to take a pill?

If you forget to take your pill, read the informational inserts or follow the instructions below:

If you miss one pill: Take it as soon as you remember and continue with the next pill at your regular time (even if that means taking two pills in one day until you finish the pack). It is best to use abstinence or a backup method for the remainder of your pill pack.

If you miss two pills in a row: Take two tablets as soon as you remember and take two tablets the next day, then return to your regular schedule. Use your back-up method for the remainder of your pill pack.

If you miss three pills in a row: You will probably already be spotting (bleeding). Call your health care provider at SHS (328-6841) or go ahead and have your period and throw the rest of your pill pack away. Begin a new pill pack the following Sunday. If you are not a Sunday starter call SHS at 328-6841. Once again, use a back-up method for the first month. If you miss pills on a regular basis, talk to your health care provider about other contraceptive options.

How can I obtain OCs from the Student Health Service?

For a detailed explanation of the process see our brochure titled "*The Pill Process*". All women seeking OCs must have a yearly gynecological exam. SHS provides these exams for a reduced cost to students. Before making an appointment for an exam, students must attend a Health Issues Class. For more information call 328-6794.

To Contact Us

General Information(252) 328-6841
Appointments.....(252) 328-6841
Immunizations.....(252) 328-6841
Health Education(252) 328-6794
Pharmacy(252) 328-6793
Fax (252) 328-4007 or 4397

gotquestions@mail.ecu.edu

Hours of Operation

Fall and Spring

(Effective mid August 2001)

8:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m., Monday - Thursday
8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Friday
9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m., Saturday & Sunday, Urgent Care

Fall and Spring Pharmacy Hours

8:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. Monday - Thursday
8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Friday

Summer

(Mid May - Mid August)

7:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., Monday - Thursday
7:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m., Friday

After hours emergencies dial 911

**Student Health Service
East Carolina University
Greenville, NC 27858**

Division of Student Life



oral contraceptive agents

or

birth control pills

