Oral Contraceptives (Birth Control Pills)

Oral contraceptives (OCs) are medicines taken to prevent pregnancy. They are the most widely used method of birth control. OCs work by preventing the ovaries from releasing eggs. The OC hormones also cause the mucus on the cervix to thicken, preventing the sperm from entering the uterus. They also cause the lining of the uterus to become thin, not allowing a fertilized egg to attach to the inside of the uterus. OCs have a failure rate of less than 1%, when taken exactly as prescribed.

THERE ARE 2 TYPES OF OC

- OC that contains a mix of estrogen and progesterone hormones is the most common OC used. It is taken for 21 days, followed by 7 days of not taking the OC hormones. It can be packaged as 28 pills, with the last 7 pills being inactive. You take a pill every day. This way you do not need to remember when to restart taking the active pills. Most women will begin their menstrual period 2 to 3 days after taking the hormone pill. The menstrual period is usually lighter and shorter. This combination OC should not be taken if you are breast-feeding.
- The progesterone only (*minipill*) OC does not contain estrogen. It is taken every day, continuously. You may have only spotting for a period, or no period at all. The progesterone only OC can be taken if you are breast-feeding your baby.

OCs come in:

- Packs of 21 pills, with no pills to take for 7 days after the last pill.
- Packs of 28 pills, with a pill to take every day. The last 7 pills are without hormones.
- Packs of 91 pills (*continuous or extended use*), with a pill to take every day. The first 84 pills contain the hormones, and the last 7 pills do not. That is when you will have your menstrual period. You will not have a menstrual period during the time you are taking the first 84 pills.

HOW TO TAKE OC

Your caregiver may advise you on how to start taking the first cycle of OCs. Otherwise, you can:

- Start on day 1 or day 5 of your menstrual period, taking the first pack of the OC. You will not need any backup contraceptive protection with this start time.
- Start on the first Sunday after your menstrual period, day 7 of your menstrual period, or the day you get your prescription. In these cases, you will need backup contraceptive protection for the first cycle.

No matter which day you start the OC, you will always start a new pack on that same day of the week. It is a good idea to have an extra pack of OCs and a backup contraceptive method available, in case you miss some pills or lose your OC pack.

COMMON REASONS FOR FAILURE

- Forgetting to take the pill at the same time every day.
- Poor absorption of the pill from the stomach into the bloodstream. This can be caused by diarrhea, vomiting, and the use of some medicines that kill germs (*antibiotics*).
- Stomach or intestinal disease.
- Taking OCs with other medicines that may make them less effective (carbamazepine, phenytoin, phenobarbital, rifampin).
- Using OCs that have passed their expiration dates.
- Forgetting to restart the pills on day 7, when using the packs of 21 pills.

If you forget to take 1 pill, take it as soon as you remember, and take the next pill at the regular time. If you miss 2 or more pills, use backup birth control until your next menstrual period starts. Also, you may have vaginal spotting or bleeding when you miss 2 or more OC pills. If you use the pack of 28 pills or 91 pills, and you miss 1 of the last 7 pills (*pills with no hormones*), it will not matter. Just throw away the rest of the non-hormone pills and start a new 28 or 91 pill pack.

COMMON USES OF OC

- Decreasing premenstrual problems (*symptoms*).
- Treating menstrual period cramps.
- Avoiding becoming pregnant.
- Regulating the menstrual cycle.
- Treating acne.
- Decreasing the heavy menstrual flow.
- Treating dysfunctional (*abnormal*) uterine bleeding.
- Treating chronic pelvic pain.
- Treating polycystic ovary syndrome (*ovary does not ovulate and produces tiny cysts*).
- Treating endometriosis (*uterus lining growing in the pelvis, tubes, and ovaries*).
- Can be used for emergency contraception.

OCs **DO NOT** prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Safer sex practices, such as using condoms along with the pill, can help prevent STDs.

BENEFITS

- OC reduces the risk of:
  - Cancer of the ovary and uterus.
  - Ovarian cysts.
  - Pelvic infection.
  - Symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome.
  - Loss of bone (*osteoporosis*).
  - Noncancerous (*benign*) breast disease (*fibrocystic breast changes*).
  - Lack of red blood cells (*anemia*) from heavy or long menstrual periods.
  - Pregnancy occurring outside the uterus (*tubal pregnancy*).
  - Acne.
- Slows down the flow of heavy menstrual periods.
- Sometimes helps control premenstrual syndrome (PMS).
- Stops menstrual cramps and pain.
- Controls irregular menstrual periods.
- Can be used as emergency contraception.

YOU **SHOULD NOT** TAKE THE PILL IF YOU:

- Are pregnant, or are trying to get pregnant.
- Have unexplained or abnormal vaginal bleeding.
- Have a history of liver disease, stroke, or heart attack.
- Smoke.
- Have a history of blood clots, cancer, or heart problems.
- Have gallbladder disease.
- Have breast cancer or suspect breast cancer.
- Have or suspect pelvic cancer.
- Have high blood pressure.
- Have high cholesterol or high triglycerides.
- Have mental depression.
- Are breast-feeding, except for the progesterone only OC, with approval of your caregiver.
- Have diabetes with kidney, eye, or other blood vessel complications. Or if you have diabetes for 20 years or more.
- Have heart valve disease.
- Have migraine headaches. They may get worse.

Before taking the pill, a woman will have a physical exam and Pap test. Your caregiver may order blood tests to check blood sugar and cholesterol levels, and other blood tests that may be necessary.

SIDE EFFECTS OF THE PILL MAY INCLUDE:

- Breast tenderness, pain and discharge.
- Change in sex drive (*increased or decreased libido*).
- Depression.
- Being tired often.
- Headaches.
- Anxiety.
- Irregular spotting or vaginal bleeding for a couple of months.
- Leg pain.
- Cramps, or swelling of your limbs (*extremities*).
- Mood swings.
- Weight loss or weight gain.
- Feeling sick to your stomach (*nausea*).
- Change in appetite (*hunger*).
- Loss of hair.
- Yeast or fungus vaginal infection.
- Nervousness.
- Rash.
- Acne.
- No menstrual period (*amenorrhea*).

When starting an OC, it is usually best to allow 2-3 months, if possible, for the body to adjust (before stopping because of side effects). This allows for adjustment to the changes in hormone levels. If a woman continues to have side effects, it may be possible to change to a different OC. It is important to discuss side effects with your caregiver. Often, changing to a different pill causes the side effects to subside.

RISKS AND COMPLICATIONS

- Blood clots of the leg, heart, lung, or brain.
- High blood pressure.
- Gallbladder disease.
- Liver tumors.
- Brain bleeding (*hemorrhage*).
- Slight risk of breast cancer.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- **Do not** smoke.
- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, fever, or breast tenderness as directed by your caregiver.
- Always use a condom to protect against sexually transmitted disease. OCs do not protect against STDs.
- Keep a calendar, marking your menstrual period days.

Recommendations, types, and dosages of OC use change continually. Discuss your choices with your caregiver, and decide what is best for you. There are always exceptions to guidelines. You should always read the information that comes with the OC, and check whether there are any new recommendations or guidelines.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop nausea and vomiting from the OC.
- You have abnormal vaginal discharge.
- You need treatment for headaches.
- You develop a rash.
- You miss your menstrual period.
- You develop abnormal vaginal bleeding.
- You are losing your hair.
- You need treatment for mood swings or depression.
- You get dizzy when taking the OC.
- You develop acne from taking the OC.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop leg pain.
- You develop chest pain.
- You develop shortness of breath.
- You develop abdominal pain.
- You have an uncontrolled headache.
- You develop numbness or slurred speech.
- You develop visual problems (*loss of vision, double or blurry vision*).
- You develop heavy vaginal bleeding.

If you are taking the pill, STOP RIGHT AWAY and CALL YOUR CAREGIVER IMMEDIATELY if the following occur:

- You develop chest pain and shortness of breath.
- You develop pain, redness, and swelling in the legs.
- You develop severe headaches, visual changes, or belly (*abdominal*) pain.
- You develop severe depression.
- You become pregnant.

Document Released: 03/09/2004 Document Re-Released: 01/09/2011
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.