# Oral Contraceptives
## Advantages and Disadvantages

Oral contraceptives (OC's) are the first choice of many women who use birth control. Before starting OC's, a complete history of family and medical problems and a physical exam with a Pap test should be done. Your caregiver may recommend other tests before taking oral contraceptives.

### THE ADVANTAGES OF ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES ARE:

- They do not interfere with sexual intercourse.
- They are the most effective means of birth control (99.5% effective).
- They do not affect becoming pregnant when discontinued using them to get pregnant.
- They are effective for use in emergency contraception (morning after pill).
- They help regulate periods in women with menstrual disorders, and help with severe pain (*dysmenorrhea*), absence of periods (*amenorrhea*), and heavy bleeding (*menorrhagia*).
- They can help prevent low red blood cells (*anemia*) in women who have heavy menstrual periods.
- They are helpful in treating *polycystic ovary syndrome* (multiple tiny cysts on the ovary that do not ovulate and have very irregular menstrual periods).
- They are helpful in reducing premenstrual symptoms and for treating *endometriosis* (uterine tissue misplaced outside its normal location).
- There is some evidence that the *progestin* (synthetic hormone) in OC's may reduce the risk of ovarian, endometrial and possibly colorectal cancers. Progestin seems to be the protective factor in OC's. Some experts believe that women at risk for ovarian cancer might consider oral contraceptives with the highest progestin dose. The longer a woman is on oral contraceptives, the greater the protection.
- Progestin OC’s can be taken safely when breastfeeding.
- They provide some protection against ectopic pregnancy, ovarian cysts, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), benign breast lumps, fibrocystic breast disease and rheumatoid arthritis.
- Certain low-dose OC's improve acne.
- Taking low-dose OC's in the years before menopause (peri-menopause) may also help protect women against anemia and osteoporosis. The estrogen hormone lowers the risk of osteoporosis.
- Although the effect of OC's on bone density is still unclear, some increase in bone density in women taking combination OC's with norethindrone (although not with desogestrel). Low-dose OC's may help prevent bone loss when a woman approaches menopause.
- Healthy, nonsmoking women who have frequent physical exams and do not have currant problems taking OC’s can take OC’s up to age 55.

### SIDE EFFECTS AND DISADVANTAGES OF ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES

- Estrogen and progesterone have different side effects. Women on the combined pill may experience different effects from those on the progestin-only pill. The most serious side effects are due to the estrogen in the combined pill. Women at risk can usually take progestin-only OC's.
- Symptoms of serious problems include:

- Feeling sick to your stomach (*nausea*) and vomiting.
- Severe abdominal pain.
- Chest pain.
- Unusual headaches including migraine headaches.
- Visual disturbances.
- Tiredness and dizziness.
- Depression.
- Decrease in sex drive (*libido*).
- Amenorrhea (never menstruated by the age of 16).
- Breakthrough bleeding.
- Yeast infections of the vagina.
- Breast tenderness.
- Acne.
- Patches of brown skin on the face (*chloasma*).
- Rash.
- Trouble using contact lenses.
- Loss of scalp hair.
- Increase hair growth of the face and chest.
- Severe pain or swelling in the legs.

- OC's should be used with caution in women over the age of 35.

**Severe uncommon complications of OC's include:**

- High blood pressure can happen. This can usually be corrected by discontinuing the medication. Women who use OC's should not be overly concerned. There is a question if OC's may cause a small but persistent increase in *diastolic blood pressure* (the second number in a blood pressure reading or pressure when your heart is resting), which may increase the risk for heart disease years later.
- They increase the risk for blood clots. The risk is higher in women with inherited clotting defects. The risk is very slight if there are no other risk factors or if taking anticoagulant therapy.
- There may be a higher risk for heart attacks in women taking OC's. Smoking is a significant risk factor in these women. It may not be as big of a risk in healthy women who do not smoke. Chances for a heart attack is also higher in OC users who have high blood pressure, unhealthy cholesterol levels, or both.
- There may be a higher than normal risk for stroke in women taking OC's even if women have no other stroke risk factors. Risk of having a stroke is still low. Smoking, migraines and high blood pressure add considerably to the risk.
- Use may increase breast or endometrial cancer. If you have a family history of breast cancer and are at a higher risk for developing breast cancer, you should be sure to have regular physical examinations, mammograms and to perform self-examinations every month after your menstrual period.
- Use can cause gall bladder disease, benign tumors of the liver, and blood clot in the lungs (*pulmonary embolisms*).

## WOMEN WHO SHOULD NOT TAKE OC'S:

- Women who are pregnant, trying to get pregnant or think they may be pregnant.
- Women who have a history of blood clots or other blood problems.
- Women who have had a heart attack or heart disease should not take the combination estrogen/progesterone OC's. The progestin only OC may be appropriate with close watching by your caregiver.
- Women who have had a stroke.
- Women who have migraine headaches.
- Women who had yellowing of the skin (*jaundice*) during pregnancy or with taking OC's in the past.
- Women with undiagnosed vaginal bleeding.
- Women who smoke.
- Women who have or had a history for breast or endometrial cancer.
- Women who are nursing should not take the combination estrogen/progesterone OC's.
- OC's should not be used for at least a month before having major surgery.

**The risk of having any of these problems is very small.**

- You should talk with your caregivers to see if OC's are safe for you.
- Recommendations for birth control use change continually. There many other options for birth control that are safe and effective depending on your situation and preference. Discuss your choices with your caregivers and decide what is best for you. You may not be able to take certain OC's. Always read the information you are given. Check to find out if there are new recommendations or guidelines for you.

Document Released: 10/28/2005 Document Re-Released: 03/16/2010
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