

# combined contraceptive pill



## COMBINED PILL

There are two main types of pill which vary in hormone content and the way they work.

The most widely used is the combined pill which contains two hormones, oestrogen and progestogen.

There are also pills which have progestogen only

SEE FACT SHEET 2 FOR DETAILS.

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

The main action of the hormones in the combined pill is to stop the ovary releasing an egg each month (ovulation).

They also thicken the fluid (mucus) at the cervix and alter the lining of the womb to make it less likely to accept a fertilised egg.

## HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?

As with any contraceptive it's effectiveness depends on how well the instructions are followed.

With perfect use the combined pill is over 99% effective meaning that less than 1 woman in 100 will become pregnant in a year.

## WHERE DO YOU GET THE COMBINED PILL?

You can only get the pill from a doctor. Family Planning Clinics and most doctors will prescribe it. You will have to pay a consultation fee and prescription cost. It is available on the GMS (Medical Card Scheme). The doctor will take a detailed medical and family history to make sure the pill is suitable for you. You should also have your blood pressure checked.

## WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES?

- » It is a very effective method when used correctly
- » It is easy to use and does not interrupt sex
- » It helps to reduce heavy or painful periods and may prevent pre-menstrual syndrome
- » As soon as you stop taking the pill you can get pregnant
- » Some pills can improve acne
- » It may protect against cancer of the ovary and cancer of the uterus (womb)
- » It reduces the incidence of noncancerous breast lumps and ovarian cysts

## WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES?

- » You need to remember to take the pill daily or it will not work
- » The pill may increase your blood pressure
- » The pill does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections
- » Breakthrough bleeding (unexpected bleeding on pill taking days) and spotting is common in the first few months of pill use
- » There are some serious side-effects (see below)

## WHO IS IT SUITABLE FOR?

Not everyone can use the combined pill so your doctor or nurse will need to ask you about your own and your family's medical history to make sure the pill is suitable. Do mention any illnesses or operations you have had and whether you are a smoker.

## HOW IS IT TAKEN?

There are three main types of pills and many different brands. It is important to know which type of pill you are taking, as they are taken differently, differently, your doctor will explain that to you and details should also come with the packet. All types of combined pill can be started at anytime in your menstrual cycle if you are sure you are not pregnant. If you start the pill on the first day of your period you will be protected from pregnancy immediately. If you start the pill at any other time in your menstrual cycle you may need to use another contraceptive method for the first seven days of pill taking. Ask your doctor.

## ARE THERE ANY SIDE-EFFECTS?

When starting the pill some women may experience: breast tenderness, skin irritation, mild headaches, a bloated feeling, or have some breakthrough bleeding (bleeding between periods). Although these can be a nuisance, they are not dangerous and should disappear within the first few months of using this contraceptive.

### HOWEVER, A WOMAN SHOULD SEE HER DOCTOR IMMEDIATELY IF WHILE USING THE PILL SHE DEVELOPS:

- » Pain or swelling in her legs
- » Severe chest pain
- » Breathlessness or coughing up blood
- » A bad fainting attack or collapse
- » Unusual headaches or difficulty with speech or sight
- » Numbness or weakness of a limb

If high blood pressure develops while on the pill regular check-ups are required.

# what to do if you forget a pill

FOR ALL COMBINED PILLS



## PREGNANCY AND THE COMBINED PILL

### IF I BECOME PREGNANT

You don't have proper periods when you are on the pill. What you have is called a 'withdrawal bleed'. This bleeding (which doesn't always happen) is caused by you not taking hormones in the pill free week.

If you took all your pills correctly and you didn't have an upset stomach or take any other medicines which might have affected the pill, then it is very unlikely you are pregnant. So start your next packet at the right time.

If you are worried ask your doctor or nurse for advice, or do a pregnancy test. Always do this if you miss more than one bleed. If you do become pregnant, there is no evidence to show that taking the combined pill harms the baby.

### AFTER CHILDBIRTH

You can start taking the pill three weeks (21 days) after you gave birth. Starting on day 21 you will be protected against pregnancy straight away. If you start later than day 21, you will need to use an extra method of contraception for seven days.

If you are breastfeeding a baby under six months old, taking the combined pill may reduce your flow of milk. It is usually recommended that you use a different method of contraception. Consult your doctor if you had any complications during pregnancy like thrombosis or embolism (clot in the lung or the leg).

### AFTER AN ABORTION OR MISCARRIAGE

You can start taking the combined pill immediately after a miscarriage or abortion, if you were pregnant for less than 24 weeks. You will be protected from pregnancy straight away.

## WHAT ABOUT RISKS?

There is some evidence that young women who start the pill early and stay on it for a long time may be at a small increased risk of breast cancer. Cancer of the cervix may also be more common in women on the pill so regular smear tests are advised.

## WHAT ABOUT ANTIBIOTICS?

Antibiotics and some natural remedies can interfere with the absorption of the hormones. It is important that you also use a barrier method like condoms while taking them and for 7 days afterwards.

## IS IT NECESSARY TO TAKE A BREAK?

There is no need to take a break from taking the pill every few years because the hormones do not build up. There are no known benefits to your health or fertility from taking a break.

## CAN YOU CHANGE PILL BRAND?

It is easy to change from one pill to another. Sometimes you need extra contraceptive protection when you change pills. Ask your doctor.

## SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS?

Ask your doctor for advice about your pill use if you are planning to have surgery, are immobilised for a prolonged time, are taking a high altitude holiday or a long-haul flight. The pill, like most methods of contraception does not protect you from Sexually Transmitted Infections. Condoms, when used correctly and consistently can help protect against STIs.

TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT AT AN IFPA MEDICAL CENTRE OR FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OUR SERVICES PLEASE CALL:

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T: +353 (t) 872 7088

IFPA, The Square, Tallaght, Dublin  
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THE IFPA ALSO OPERATES A NATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICE PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND DETAILS OF STI AND CONTRACEPTIVE SERVICES IN YOUR AREA.

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PLEASE NOTE – THIS LEAFLET CAN ONLY OUTLINE BASIC INFORMATION ON THE COMBINED PILL. INFORMATION IS BASED ON EVIDENCE AND MEDICAL OPINION AT THE TIME OF PUBLICATION HOWEVER YOU MAY COME ACROSS CONFLICTING ADVICE ON CERTAIN POINTS. RING OR VISIT YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU ARE WORRIED OR UNSURE ABOUT ANYTHING.