

Oral contraceptives

Note: for this Fact Card, the term woman refers to a person with a reproductive system characteristic of a biological female. This may include a person who is transgender or gender diverse, or has variations of sex characteristics.

Oral contraceptives are tablets taken by women to prevent pregnancy. **There are different types of oral contraceptives and a doctor or pharmacist can assist you in selecting one that best suits your needs. While oral contraceptives can be a very effective form of birth control, they do not protect against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).**

Oral contraceptives contain low doses of hormones. These hormones are similar to the hormones that regulate a woman's menstrual cycle (periods). There are two main types of oral contraceptive pills (OCPs):

- **Combined oral contraceptives (COCs)** contain two types of hormones – an oestrogen and a progestogen.
- **Progestogen-only pills (POPs)** contain one type of hormone – a progestogen.

Combined oral contraceptives – 'the pill'

COCs contain an oestrogen and a progestogen. They work by:

- preventing ovulation (the release of an egg from the ovary)
- thickening the mucus in the cervix so sperm cannot enter the uterus

- changing the lining of the uterus (so it is not ideal for pregnancy).

There are many COCs available in Australia. Different COCs contain different amounts and types of oestrogen and progestogen. These differences can mean different health risks, side effects and costs. All COCs can prevent pregnancy, but some may be better for managing pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), period problems or acne.

How to take COCs

COCs need to be taken at about the same time each day, and not more than 24 hours later than the usual time. Most COC packs contain hormone tablets and inactive tablets. The number of hormone tablets in a one-month pack can be different for different COCs. The number of hormone tablets affects the timing of your period.

Benefits of COCs

For many women, a COC:

- can be up to 99.7% effective for birth control if taken correctly
- does not interfere with sex
- makes periods more regular, shorter, lighter and less painful
- allows control over the timing of a period
- probably reduces the risk of endometrial and ovarian cancer.

Side effects of COCs

COCs may cause side effects for a short time when you first start taking them. You may need to try different COCs before finding one that suits you. Side effects can include nausea, headaches, tender breasts, mood changes, weight gain, bloating and spotting. COCs are not suitable for breastfeeding mothers as they may reduce breast milk supply.

Health risks of COCs

The risk of certain side effects occurring can depend on the type of COC used. COCs can increase the risks of thrombosis (blood clots), heart attack, stroke and high blood pressure. They are also associated with a slightly increased risk of breast cancer and cervical cancer. They may not be suitable for women who smoke or are very overweight, or have certain medical conditions. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Progestogen-only pills (POPs)

POPs contain only a progestogen.

There are two types of POPs. The first type (known as 'the mini pill') contains progestogen hormones called 'levonorgestrel' or 'norethisterone'. The second type contains a progestogen hormone called 'drospirenone'. POPs mainly work by:

- thickening the mucus in the cervix so that sperm cannot enter the uterus
- changing the lining of the uterus (so it is not ideal for pregnancy)
- preventing the release of an egg from the ovary (in the case of a drospirenone POP).

How to take POPS

A POP should be taken at the same time each day and not more than 3 hours later than usual (except for a drospirenone POP which can be taken up to 24 hours later than usual).

Most POP packs contain only hormone tablets. An exception to this is a drospirenone POP pack which contains hormone and inactive tablets.

Benefits, side effects and health risks of POPS

You can take POPs if the oestrogen in COCs is a problem for you. POPs may also be suitable for breastfeeding mothers as they do not affect breast milk supply. The most common side effect of POPs is changes in the bleeding pattern of your periods. Some other side effects are tender breasts and headaches. POPs may not be suitable for women who have heart disease, thrombosis, breast cancer or liver disease.

Self care

OCPs are very effective if used correctly. Some things may stop OCPs from working. These include missing a dose, vomiting, diarrhoea or taking certain other medicines. If this happens, you may need to use another method of birth control (e.g. condoms).

Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

- Carefully follow instructions from your doctor or pharmacist on when to start taking your OCP, how to continue taking it and what to do if you forget or are late in taking a dose. Handy instructions are also inside the medicine packet.

- Be alert for side effects that include severe headaches, severe pain in the chest, leg or stomach, swelling of the leg or breathing problems. Immediately report these to your doctor.
- Discuss with your doctor any changes to your period pattern.
- Check with a doctor or pharmacist before taking any other medicines.
- Have your blood pressure checked often.
- Don't smoke.
- Have regular cervical screening tests. Ask your doctor for advice.
- If you are at risk of sexually transmissible infections (STIs), use condoms at the same time as taking oral contraceptives.

Important

Your OCP may not work if you do not start taking it correctly, you are late in taking it or you miss a dose.

Both COCPs and POPs need to be taken at about the same time each day. COCPs have a '24 hour missed pill window'. This means if you are more than 24 hours late in taking your pill, you may not be protected from pregnancy. POPs have a '3 hour missed pill window'. This means if you are more than 3 hours late in taking your pill, you may not be protected from pregnancy. An exception is drospirenone POP as it has a 24 hour missed pill window.

Your doctor or pharmacist can advise you when to start taking your OCP, how to take it and how to manage missed/late doses.

If its hard for you to take a pill at the same time every day, talk with your doctor or pharmacist about other contraception options.

Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP)- the 'morning after pill'

ECP is used to reduce the risk of getting pregnant after unprotected intercourse (or if OCP will not work due to missed/late dose(s)). ECP is available over the counter from your pharmacist. The emergency contraceptive pill is most likely to prevent pregnancy if taken as soon as possible after unprotected intercourse.

You should not use the emergency contraceptive pills as a regular contraceptive to prevent pregnancy. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist for further advice.

For more information

Family Planning Alliance Australia

Website: <https://familyplanningallianceaustralia.org.au/>

Family Planning Australia Talkline

Phone: 1300 658 886
Website: www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline

Jean Hailes for Women's Health

Website: www.jeanhailes.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

1300 MEDICINE

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
Website: <https://1300medicine.com.au/>

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets

Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 for expert advice.

Related Fact Cards

- » *Contraception*
- » *Menstrual chart*
- » *Period problems*
- » *Pregnancy and ovulation*
- » *Acne*
- » *Breast awareness and pap smear*

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

Your Self Care Pharmacy:

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia is committed to providing current and reliable health information.
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