

Birth Control Pill

What is the birth control pill (the pill)?

The pill is taken every day to prevent pregnancy. It contains hormones (estrogen and progestin) that are like natural hormones. They stop the ovaries from releasing an egg. You can't get pregnant if you don't release an egg.



How well does the pill work?

- With **typical use** (not following the exact directions) the pill is **91%** effective.
- With **perfect use** (following the exact directions all the time) the pill is **99.7%** effective.
- Most pregnancies happen because people forget to take their pills.
- The pill doesn't protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or HIV.

How do I start taking the pill?

You need a prescription from your health care provider. Many sexual health clinics offer some types of birth control for free or for low cost for people who qualify. If you start the first hormone pill on:

- day 1 of your period, it works right away to prevent pregnancy
- any other day, use an extra method of birth control (e.g., condoms) or don't have vaginal sex for 7 days

How do I use the pill?

To use a 28-day pack:

Take 1 pill each day at the same time. There are different types of 28-day packages:

- first 21 pills have hormones and the last 7 pills are hormone-free
- first 24 pills have hormones and the last 4 pills are hormone-free
- first 26 pills have hormones and the last 2 pills are hormone-free

You'll usually get your period 2 to 3 days after starting the hormone-free pills. You're still protected from pregnancy during this time.

When the pack is done, start a new pack the next day. Always start your new pack of pills **on time, even if your period hasn't ended**. Your period should stop in a few days.

If you don't get a period or it's much lighter than usual, start your new pill pack and see your health care provider. Consider also doing a pregnancy test if you've had vaginal sex without a condom since your last period.

To use a 21-day pack:

- Take 1 pill each day at the same time for 21 days.
- When the pack is done, wait 7 days before you start a new pack. You'll get your period when you aren't taking pills (hormone-free days). You're still protected from pregnancy during this time.
- The hormone-free days must **not** be longer than 7 days. At the end of the hormone-free days, start a new pack. Always start your new pack of pills **on time, even if your period hasn't ended**. Your period should stop in a few days.
- If you don't get a period or it's much lighter than usual, start your new pill pack and see your health care provider. Consider also doing a pregnancy test if you've had vaginal sex without a condom since your last period.

What are the benefits of the pill?

- Your period may be more regular, lighter, and/or shorter with less cramping.
- The pill may lower your risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer.
- The pill may help with acne and painful periods (dysmenorrhea).
- It's safe to use the pill for many years. There is no need to "take a break" from the pill.
- You can get pregnant as soon as you stop using the pill.

What are the side effects of the pill?

There's a chance (more likely in the first 3 months) that you might have:

- headaches
- upset stomach (nausea)
- spotting or bleeding between periods
- breast/chest tenderness
- mood changes
- bloating
- weight changes

If you have any side effects, don't stop taking the pill. Talk to your health care provider. Most side effects get better within 3 months.

Can the pill cause blood clots?

When taking the pill, there's a small risk of blood clots in the legs, lungs, heart, and/or the head. The risk is higher depending on:

- age
- weight
- history (or family history) of blood clots, heart attack, or stroke
- history of smoking or vaping nicotine (especially people older than 35 who smoke or vape)
- if you are less than 21 days postpartum
- history of migraines with aura or other nervous system problems affecting speech, vision, movement, or sensations
- risk factors for heart disease (e.g., high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol)
- history of other medical problems (ask your health care provider about this)

The risk of getting a blood clot is higher during pregnancy and right after having a baby than when taking the pill. The risk for blood clots might be different depending on the type of progestin in your pill.

Blood clots are very serious. Go to the nearest emergency department or call 911 if you have:

- trouble breathing and/or it hurts to breathe
- a very bad headache
- very bad pain in your chest, abdomen, or legs
- eye problems (e.g., sudden blurry vision or loss of vision)
- one leg is swollen
- sudden numbness in the face, arms, or legs (often only on one side of the body)
- sudden confusion or trouble understanding what people say to you

What if I forget to take my pills?

Missing any pills can increase your risk of pregnancy. Your risk is increased if you miss a pill right at the start or the end of your pack. If you need help deciding what to do, talk to your health care provider, read the chart below, or go to sexandu.ca, click on contraception, and look for *Stay On Schedule*. There are also apps you can use on your phone to help you remember to take your pill.

If you took a pill **less than 48 hours** ago:

- take it as soon as you remember (this might mean you take 2 pills on the same day)
- continue taking 1 pill every day at the same time
- you're protected from pregnancy

If you took your last pill **more than 48 hours** ago:

Week 1	Week 2 or 3	Week 2 or 3
Forgot 1 or more pills	Forgot 1 or 2 pills	Forgot 3 or more pills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take 1 pill right away (this might mean you take 2 pills on the same day). • Continue to take 1 pill every day until the end of the pack. • Use an extra method of birth control (e.g., condoms) or don't have vaginal sex for 7 days. • Get emergency contraception as soon as possible if your extra method of birth control fails (e.g., condom breaks) or you've had vaginal sex without a condom in the last 5 days. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take 1 pill right away (this might mean you take 2 pills on the same day). • Continue to take 1 pill every day until you finish your hormone pills. • Don't take hormone-free days and start a new pack right away. • You might have spotting or miss your period this month. Don't stop taking your pills. • You're protected from pregnancy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take 1 pill right away (this might mean you take 2 pills on the same day). • Continue to take 1 pill every day until the end of your hormone pills. • Don't take hormone-free days and start a new pack right away. • Use an extra method of birth control (e.g., condoms) or don't have vaginal sex for 7 days. • Get emergency contraception as soon as possible if your extra method of birth control fails (e.g., condom breaks) or you've had vaginal sex without a condom in the last 5 days. • You might have spotting or miss your period this month. Don't stop taking your pills.

If you vomit within 1 hour of taking the pill, take the next pill in your package. This means you'll start your next pack of pills 1 day early.

Did You Know

- You have the right to decide to have sex or not. Talk with your partner(s) about consent.
- There's an 85% chance of becoming pregnant within one year if no birth control is used for vaginal sex.
- Use a condom/barrier every time you have sex (oral, vaginal, anal). Condoms help prevent pregnancy, STIs and HIV.
- You can lower your risk of HIV by taking an HIV prevention pill every day. Many Albertans can get it for free. Visit www.prepalberta.ca to find out more.
- Transgender and gender diverse people who have a uterus can use hormonal birth control. It can help prevent pregnancy and make periods lighter and less painful.

Websites

- ahs.ca/srh
- ReadyorNotAlberta.ca
- TeachingSexualHealth.ca
- myhealth.alberta.ca
- sexandu.ca

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call Health Link at 811.



Scan for more information