

Hormonal Birth Control: Extended and Continuous Use

What is extended and continuous use of hormonal birth control?

- **Extended use** is when you take your birth control product for 2 or more cycles without stopping and then take a planned, hormone-free break. You will have your period during this break. By doing this, you will have fewer periods.
- **Continuous use** is when you take your birth control product without stopping (without taking planned hormone-free breaks). You will have fewer or no periods.

Which hormonal birth control products can I use for extended or continuous use?

You will need to see your healthcare provider for extended and continuous use because:

- you need a prescription for hormonal birth control
- only some birth control products with estrogen and progestin can be used safely in a continuous or extended way (e.g., some birth control pills, birth control patch, and the birth control ring)

Your healthcare provider will tell you how to use this method of birth control.

How well does extended and continuous use of hormonal birth control work?

- 8 to 9 out of 10 women will get pregnant in one year if having intercourse without birth control.
- Extended and continuous use of birth control has the same effectiveness as traditional use of birth control.
- With typical use (this means not following the exact directions, for example you might miss or be late with birth control) the birth control pill, patch, and ring are **92 to 97 percent** effective.
- With perfect use (this means you follow the exact directions all the time) the birth control pill, patch, and ring are **99.7 percent** effective.
- Most pregnancies happen because women forget to take their birth control.
- Hormonal methods of birth control don't protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.
- Use a condom **every time** you have sex (vaginal, oral, anal) to lower your risk of STIs and HIV.

What are the benefits of extended and continuous use?

- You may have fewer periods or no period at all.
- It may help you manage your period symptoms (e.g., cramping).

What are the side effects of extended and continuous use?

The short-term effects are the same as for traditional use of your method of birth control (see the information for your product). The long-term effects are not known.

The most common side effect with continuous and extended use is spotting or bleeding between periods. This will get better over time.

What can I do if I have spotting or bleeding between periods?

If you have 4 days of spotting or bleeding and have taken **at least 21 days** of your birth control product:

1. Take a 4-day hormone-free break.
2. Restart your birth control after the break (even if you are still spotting or bleeding).

You must take **at least 21 days** of birth control **in a row** before you can take another hormone-free break.

Can hormonal birth control cause blood clots?

In rare cases, women using the birth control pill, patch, or ring can get a blood clot in the blood vessels. The risk is higher if you have:

- a family history of blood clots
- had a blood clot, heart attack, or stroke

If you want to try continuous and extended use of birth control, talk to your doctor if you are:

- over 35 and smoke
- obese

The risk for a blood clot is higher during pregnancy and right after having a baby than when taking the pill.

What symptoms do I need to watch for?

Go to the nearest emergency room or call 911 if you have:

- very bad pain in your abdomen, chest, or legs
- numbness in your arms or legs
- trouble breathing
- a very bad headache
- eye problems (e.g., sudden blurry vision or loss of vision)

Did You Know

You have the right to make the decision to have sex or not.

Plan ahead and decide to protect yourself to lower your risk of pregnancy, STIs, and HIV.

It is important to talk with your partner about how you can protect each other.

It is safe not to have a period every month. With hormonal birth control, the lining of your uterus doesn't build up. It gets thin and doesn't need to be shed.

Some medicines can affect how hormonal birth control works. If you are using hormonal birth control, talk to a pharmacist **before** you take other medicines (prescription or over-the-counter).

Do a pregnancy test if you have:

- not been using your birth control product the right way
- unexpected changes in vaginal bleeding
- symptoms of pregnancy (e.g., sore breasts, feel tired, or feeling sick to your stomach)

Continuous or extended use of birth control is not expected to affect fertility. However, long-term effects are not known.

What if I forget or am late for my birth control:

If you forget or are late with taking your birth control:

- follow the directions for the method of birth control that you are using (e.g., pill, patch, ring, injection)
- contact your healthcare provider or Health Link Alberta (phone numbers at the end of the handout)

Think about getting **emergency contraception** to help prevent pregnancy if you:

- took your birth control late during the **first 21 days** since your last hormone-free break
- took more than a 7-day break at any time

Websites

www.myhealth.alberta.ca

www.sexualityandu.ca

www.teachingsexualhealth.ca

www.albertahealthservices.ca and search for Sexual and Reproductive Health

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call Health Link Alberta at 403-943-LINK (5465) in the Calgary area, 780-408-5465 in the Edmonton area, or 1-866-408-LINK (5465) toll-free.

This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.