

FACT or Fiction

All about the Pill

The information in this booklet is not meant to replace professional medical advice. Please consult your doctor for more information.

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*Challenge what
you've heard.*

Talk to your doctor.

The combined pill.
Separating fact from fiction.

FACT
or
Fiction
All about the Pill



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What is the combined pill?

The combined pill, which contains a combination of hormones that control the menstrual cycle, is used by many women around the world to prevent unplanned pregnancies.

The combined pill contains an estrogen and a progestin; these hormones are synthetic versions of two key hormones that control the menstrual cycle.

The hormones in the combined pill work in two main ways to prevent pregnancy:

- They prevent the ovaries from releasing an egg (a process known as ovulation).
- They thicken the mucus in the cervix, making it more difficult for sperm to enter the womb (the uterus).

Menstrual Cycle

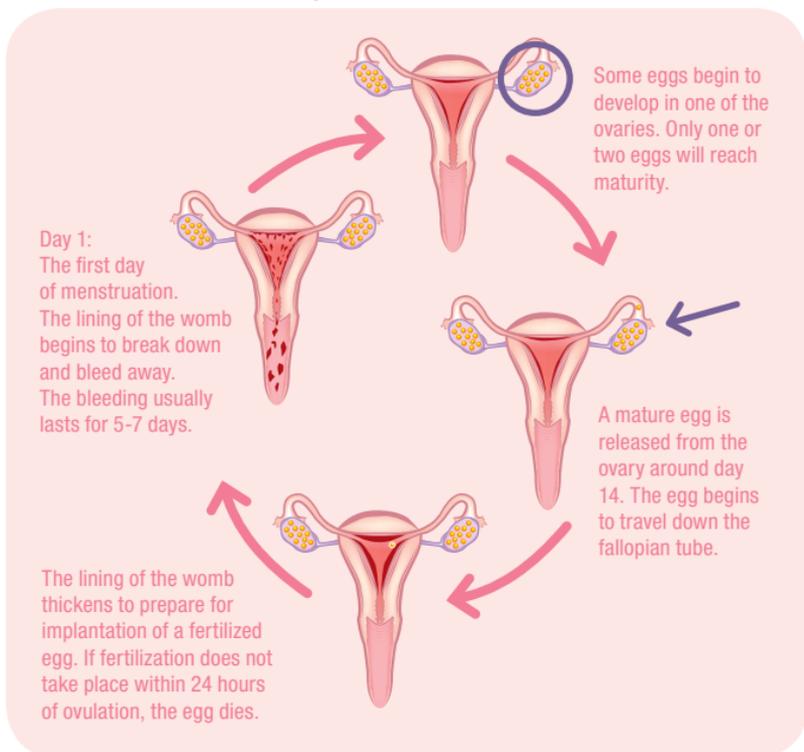


Image adapted from www.nchealthystart.org/public/beforepreg/famplan_before_birth_control.htm



Will the combined pill prevent me from getting pregnant?

Yes – it is over 99% effective, if it is taken correctly and consistently.

The prevention of pregnancy is the greatest benefit of the combined pill. When taken correctly and consistently, the combined pill is one of the most reliable methods of preventing pregnancy.¹

- If the combined pill is taken correctly and consistently, less than 1 in 300 women become pregnant in their first year of use.¹

The combined pill is more effective than male or female condoms, vaginal diaphragms/caps, or spermicide.¹

The combined pill is easy to take: just one pill, once a day. Take each pill at around the same time every day – pick a time of day that is easy to remember.

- It is important to make sure you do not miss a pill – doing so will reduce the contraceptive efficacy of the pill.

Make sure you take the combined pill according to your doctor's instructions, as well as the instructions in the package leaflet.

Are all combined pills the same?

No. The combined pill is available in different types, to suit different women.

Different types of combined pill contain different synthetic hormones and different amounts of those hormones, and have different regimens.

- For example, some combined pills should be taken for 21 days with a 7-day pill break, whereas others should be taken for 24 days with a 4-day pill break.

Different types of combined pill suit different women according to their state of health and stage in life.

- What is suitable for one woman may not be the same for another individual.

Your doctor can explain to you how each type of combined pill is different.

*Talk to your doctor
to discuss the most appropriate
type of combined pill for you.*





Talk to your doctor
if your periods are
particularly heavy,
painful or irregular.

**Can the combined pill help
my period problems?**

Yes, in many cases.

Taking the combined pill can help to regulate your menstrual cycle²

Taking the combined pill can reduce heavy menstrual bleeding.^{2,4-6}

- Studies looking at the effect of combined pills on menstrual bleeding have found a reduction in menstrual blood loss of over 40%.^{2,4-6}
- In the UK guidelines, the combined pill is recommended as a treatment for heavy menstrual bleeding.⁷

Taking the combined pill can reduce period pain.⁸

- In a study of more than 1400 Swedish women, women taking the combined pill experienced significantly less period pain than non-pill users, which corresponded with greater ability to do everyday activities and the use of less painkillers.⁸

Do combined pills have side effects?

Yes, but common side effects are generally mild, and in most cases are transient, only lasting for a few months.^{9,47,48} Serious side effects can occur, but are not common.^{9,10} For most women the benefits of the combined pill outweigh the possible risks.

The most commonly reported side effects during combined pill use include nausea, breast tenderness and headaches.⁹ In most cases, these side effects are mild and resolve within a few months of starting to take the combined pill.^{9,47,48}

- Less common side effects of combined pills can include acne, decreased libido, dizziness, fluid retention, mood changes and depression, vomiting and other gastrointestinal symptoms, and weight changes.⁹



Talk to your doctor if you experience side effects.



Will the combined pill make me put on weight?

The combined pill does not have a noticeable long-term effect on body weight.

- Some women believe that the combined pill causes weight gain.¹¹ However, this has not been proven in clinical studies that have looked at the long-term effect of the pill on body weight.^{12,13}
- Some women may experience small fluctuations in weight after starting to take the combined pill, and pill-induced fluid retention has been put forward as a possible explanation for short-term weight gain.¹⁴

Talk to your doctor
if you would like to find out more.

Will taking the combined pill now harm my chances of having a healthy baby in the future?

No. A history of combined pill use has no negative effect on fertility or pregnancy outcomes.

The effects of the combined pill on your ability to conceive are completely reversible, meaning that taking it will not affect your chances of becoming pregnant when you stop taking it^{15,16}

- Amongst women who stop taking an oral contraceptive because they want to have a baby, approximately 1 out of 5 become pregnant within one month, more than 2 out of 5 become pregnant within three months, and approximately 4 out of 5 become pregnant within one year.¹⁶
- This is not significantly influenced by the type of oral contraceptive or the duration of pill use.¹⁶
- These rates were similar to those estimated in studies investigating rates of pregnancy in women who had previously used natural methods to prevent pregnancy.^{17,18}

Did you know?...

Some women may stop taking the combined pill for a few weeks or months each year because they believe that the combined pill reduces fertility and they want their body to ovulate naturally every now and then.¹⁹ However, there is no clinical basis for this and it may increase the risk of unplanned pregnancy. Furthermore, starting to take the combined pill again after a break of four weeks or more has been associated with an increased risk of blood clots.²⁰

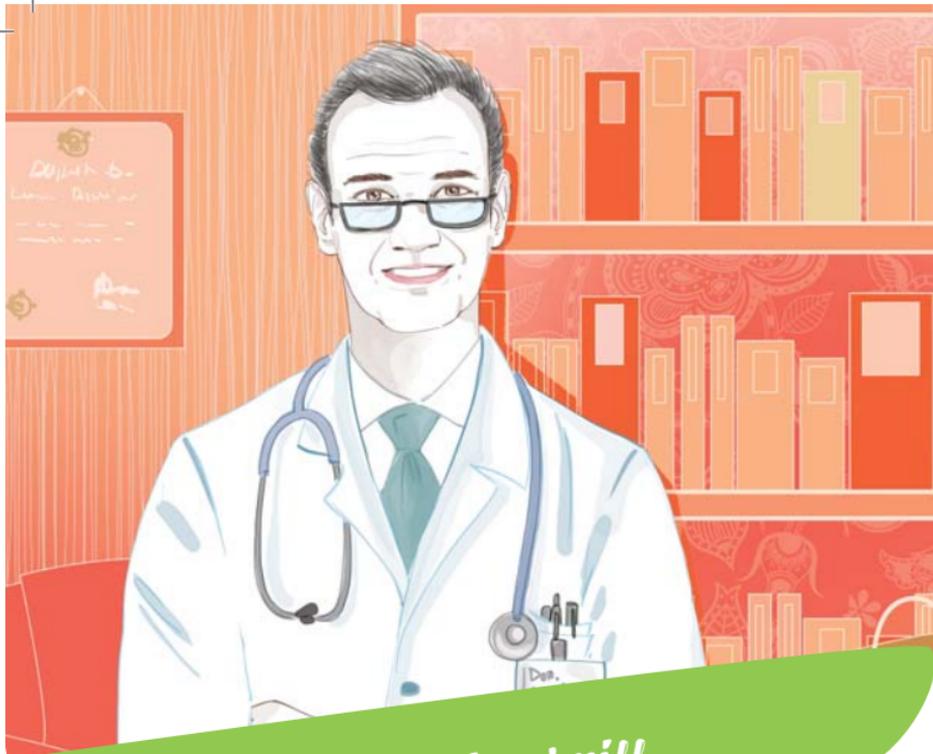
*Pill breaks to preserve fertility are unnecessary and not recommended.**

* You should take the combined pill according to your doctor's instructions, as well as the instructions in the package leaflet. The longer pill breaks described above should not be confused with taking a short pill break of a few days, or taking hormone-free tablets which are part of the monthly pill regimen.



- Taking the combined pill before getting pregnant is not linked to an increased risk of spontaneous miscarriage.²¹
- Accidentally taking the combined pill during early pregnancy is not associated with birth defects.²²
- Women taking the combined pill have a lower risk of ectopic pregnancy, abnormal implantation of the pregnancy outside the womb.²

If you discover you are pregnant, you should stop taking the combined pill and see your doctor.



Does the combined pill increase my risk of cancer?

Breast cancer is the most common form of invasive cancer in women.²³ Oral contraceptives appear to have modest or no effects on the risk of breast cancer.²⁴⁻²⁹

- In instances where an increased risk was identified, this reduced over time following oral contraceptive discontinuation.²⁹

The major cause of cervical cancer is a persistent sexually transmitted viral infection called Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).³⁰ Studies have indicated that long-term use of oral contraceptives may further contribute to this increased risk.^{24,25,31}

- Women who choose the combined pill as their method of contraception may use other methods of contraception, such as condoms, less frequently. They may therefore be more likely to be exposed to HPV.³²

Does the combined pill increase my risk of cancer?

The combined pill actually reduces the risk of developing some cancers

- Taking the combined pill reduces the risk of ovarian cancer^{25,33-35} and endometrial cancer,^{25,36-39} which is cancer of the lining of the womb.
 - The longer you take the combined pill, the lower the risk.^{25,36,37}
 - When you stop taking the combined pill, its protective effect lasts for many years afterwards.^{25,33,36,37}

- The combined pill may also reduce the risk of colorectal cancer, a type of bowel cancer.^{40,41}

Did you know?...

The combined pill is not associated with an overall increased risk of cancer.²⁵

The risk of certain types of cancer may even be reduced in women who have used oral contraception.²⁵



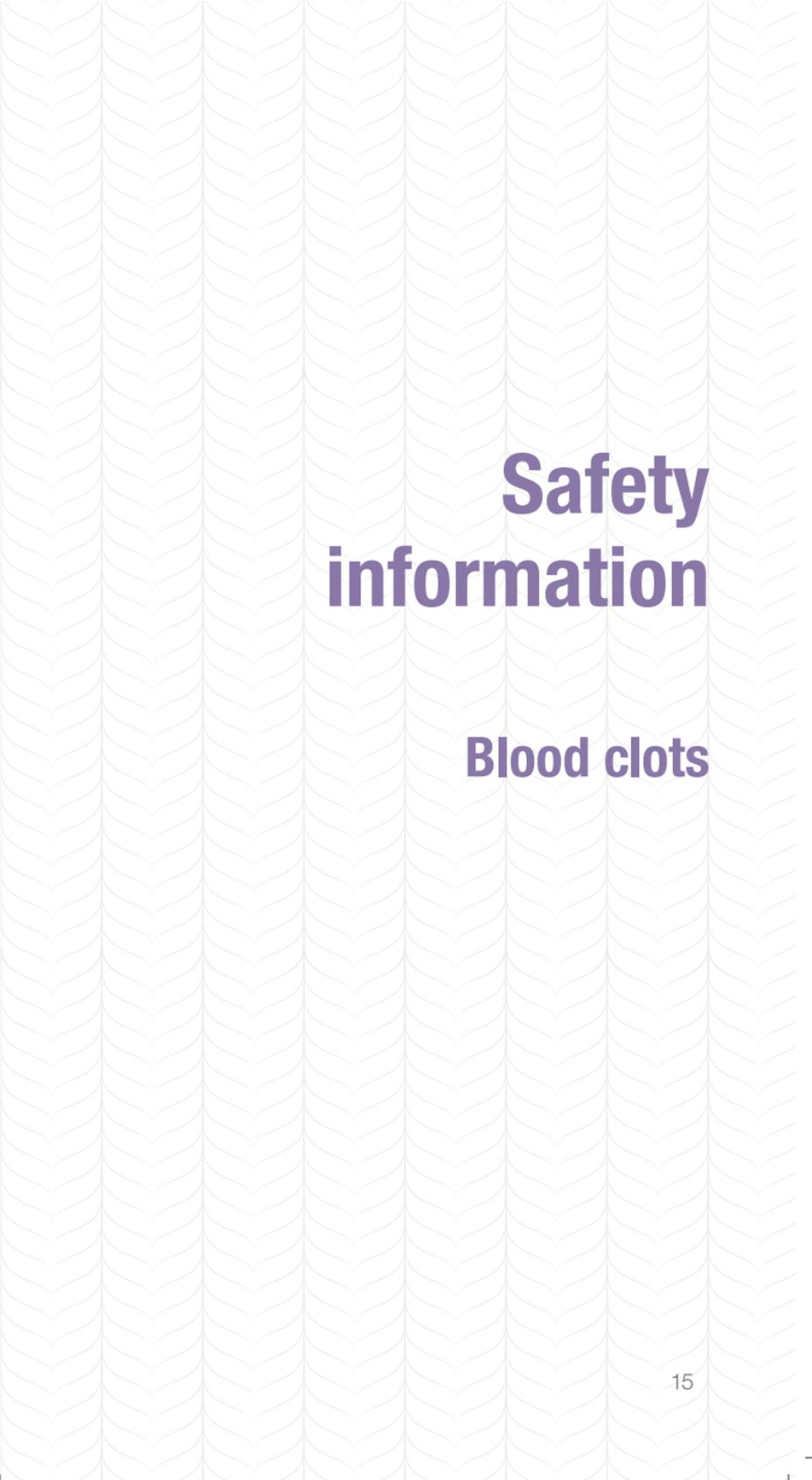
Apart from contraception, does the combined pill offer any other benefits?

Yes, in several cases.

- Some types of combined pill can be used to treat acne in women who choose to use the combined pill as their method of contraception.⁴² However, acne may also be a side effect of the combined pill, depending on the type of hormones it contains.^{9,43-45}
- The combined pill may offer some protection against Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID), a complication of certain sexually transmitted infections.⁴⁶

Remember

The combined pill does not protect against HIV, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted infections. If you are at risk of contracting such an infection, you or your partner should use a barrier method of contraception such as condoms. Talk to your doctor if you want to know more about sexually transmitted infections.



Safety information

Blood clots

Safety information: Blood clot

Using a combined pill increases your risk of developing a blood clot compared with not using one.

Blood clots can develop:

- In veins (referred to as a 'venous thrombosis', 'venous thromboembolism', or VTE).
 - If a blood clot forms in a vein in the leg or foot, it can cause a deep vein thrombosis (DVT).
 - If a blood clot travels from the leg and lodges in the lung, it can cause a pulmonary embolism (PE).
 - Very rarely, a blood clot may form in a vein in the eye and cause a retinal vein thrombosis.
- In arteries (referred to as an 'arterial thrombosis', 'arterial thromboembolism', or ATE).
 - If a blood clot forms in an artery of the heart or brain, it can cause a heart attack or stroke, respectively. Symptoms of a heart attack can include chest pain or discomfort, sometimes radiating to the jaw or arm. Symptoms of a stroke can include sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body, or sudden confusion, or trouble speaking or understanding. You should seek urgent medical attention if you notice any of these signs or symptoms.

Safety information: Blood clot

Blood clot is a serious but rare complication associated with taking the combined pill.

When is the risk of developing a blood clot in a vein highest?

- The risk of developing a blood clot in a vein is highest during the first year of taking the combined pill for the first time. The risk may also be higher if you re-start the pill after a break of four weeks or more.⁴⁹
- After the first year, the risk becomes smaller, but it is always slightly higher than if you were not taking the combined pill. **However, your risk of a blood clot in a vein is lower compared to pregnancy or during the weeks after childbirth.**⁵⁰

Factors that increase your risk of a blood clot in a vein

- The risk of a blood clot with the combined pill is small, but some conditions will increase the risk. Your chance of having a blood clot is increased if you have a genetic susceptibility to this type of condition.
- Other risk factors for VTE include:
 - major surgery
 - long periods of immobility (e.g. long haul flights prolonged car travel)
 - pregnancy and childbirth
 - increasing age and obesity.

It is important to tell your doctor if any of these conditions apply to you, even if you are unsure.

Your doctor may decide that the combined pill is not appropriate for you.



*Write down questions
for your doctor here*









*Before making a decision
on contraception, make sure
you know all the facts*

*There are a lot of myths surrounding
oral contraception.*

- Your doctor has all the facts: talk to your doctor to get full and personalized advice on the best contraceptive option for you.



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