

Introduction

The combined oral contraceptive (COC) pill contains two hormones, oestrogen and progestogen. It may be taken by women to prevent pregnancy. Sometimes, the COC pill may also be taken for:

- painful or heavy periods,
- premenstrual syndrome, or
- endometriosis.

The main types of COC pill are described below.

Standard strength oestrogen: 21 day

As the name suggests, standard strength oestrogen pills contain a standard strength of oestrogen (30-35 micrograms) together with a progestogen. Each pack contains 21 pills. A pill is taken every day for three weeks, then there is a pill-free break for seven days, then a new pack of pills is started.

One brand of the COC pill (Norinyl-1) contains an oestrogen called mestranol. It is a slightly higher strength than the others but has the same effect as a standard strength COC pill.

If the pills are all the same colour, they contain the same amount of oestrogen and progestogen throughout the cycle. They're sometimes called monophasic pills.

If the pills are different colours, they contain different amounts of oestrogen and progestogen depending on the stage of the cycle. They're sometimes called biphasic or triphasic pills.

Standard strength oestrogen: 28 day or every day (ED)

Standard strength oestrogen pills contain a standard strength of oestrogen (30-35 micrograms) together with a progestogen. Each pack contains 28 pills: 21 active pills and seven inactive or 'dummy' pills. A pill is taken every day for 28 days, and then a new pack of pills is started. There is no pill-free break.

If the active pills (first 21 pills) are all the same colour, they contain the same amount of oestrogen and progestogen throughout the cycle. They're sometimes called monophasic pills.

If the active pills (first 21 pills) are different colours, they contain different amounts of oestrogen and progestogen depending on the stage of the cycle. They're sometimes called biphasic or triphasic pills.

The inactive pills (last seven pills) are white and are larger than the active pills.

Low strength oestrogen: 21 day

Low strength oestrogen pills contain a low strength of oestrogen (20 micrograms) plus a progestogen.

Each pack contains 21 pills. A pill is taken every day for three weeks, then there is a pill-free break for seven days, then a new pack of pills is started.

The low strength oestrogen COC pill may be considered if you're at risk of developing blood clots, but are otherwise suitable for a COC pill. (See the 'special considerations' section.)

Dianette

Dianette (also called co-cyprindiol) is a special type of pill that's used when women want a treatment for acne or unwanted hair growth, and also want contraception. For routine contraception, the COC pills described above are preferred.

Names

There are many different brands of combined oral contraceptive pills including:

Standard strength oestrogen - 21 day

- BiNovum
- Brevinor
- Cilest
- Dianette
- Femodene
- Katya 30/75
- Loestrin 30
- Logynon
- Microgynon 30
- Norimin
- Norinyl-1
- Ovysmen
- Ovranelle
- Synphase
- Triadene
- Trinordial
- TriNovum
- Yasmin

Standard strength oestrogen - 28 day or Every Day (ED)

- Femodene ED
- Logynon ED
- Microgynon ED

Low strength oestrogen - 21 day

- Femodette
- Loestrin 20
- Mercilon
- Sunya 20/75

How it works

The Combined Oral Contraceptive (COC) pill contains two hormones, oestrogen and progestogen.

It works by:

- Preventing ovulation (the release of an egg from the ovary each month).
- Thickening the mucus in the neck of the womb, so it is harder for sperm to penetrate into the womb and reach an egg.
- Thinning the lining of the womb, so there is less chance of a fertilised egg implanting into the womb and being able to grow.

The COC pill is one of the most effective methods of contraception. When taken correctly, less than 1 woman out of a 1000 taking the COC pill for a year, will get pregnant.

Starting the COC pill

The COC pill is usually started on the first day of your period (Day 1 of the menstrual cycle). If this is done, you will be protected from pregnancy straight away and you won't need additional contraception.

The COC pill may also be started up to Day 5 of your menstrual cycle. This gives protection from pregnancy straight away unless you have a short menstrual cycle (your period is every 23 days or less). If you have a short menstrual cycle, you will need additional contraception (e.g. condoms) until you have taken the COC pill for 7 days.

The COC pill may be started at any other time in your menstrual cycle. However, you will not be protected from pregnancy straight away and you will need additional contraception until you have taken the COC pill for 7 days.

If you have had a miscarriage or abortion, the COC pill can be started up to 7 days after this and you will be protected from pregnancy straight away. If started more than 7 days after the miscarriage or abortion then use additional contraception until you have taken the COC pill for 7 days.

If you have just had a baby and are not breastfeeding, the COC pill can be started on Day 21 after the birth. You will be protected against pregnancy straight away. If started later than 21 days after giving birth, you will need to use additional contraception until you have taken the COC pill for 7 days.

Taking pill packs back to back

For monophasic COC pills (pills all the same colour), it is normally fine to start a new pack of pills straight after your last one (e.g. if you want to delay your period for a holiday). However, avoid taking more than two packs together unless advised by your GP. This is because the womb lining continues to build up and you may have breakthrough bleeding as it sheds slightly. Also, some women find they feel very bloated if they run several packs of the pill together.

It is a little more complicated if you are taking a biphasic or triphasic pill. To find out how best to do this, see the Common Health Question "Can I take two packets of the pill back to back?" See related articles. You can also call NHS Direct on 0845 45 46 47

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or the fpa helpline on 0845 122 8690 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting 0845 122
8690 end_of_the_skype_highlighting (Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm) for advice.

Special considerations

Blood Clots

The oestrogen in the COC pill may cause your blood to clot more readily. If a blood clot develops, it could cause a deep vein thrombosis (clot in your leg), pulmonary embolus (clot in the lung), stroke or heart attack.

The risk is very small - less than 3 women out of 10,000 women taking the COC pill for a year will get a deep vein thrombosis. However, before prescribing the COC pill, your doctor will check whether you have any risk factors.

The COC pill may be taken with caution if you have one risk factor but should not be taken if you have two or more risk factors. The risk factors are:

- Over 35 years old.
- Smoking or stopped smoking in the last year.
- Very overweight. The COC pill may be taken with caution if your body mass index (BMI) is 35-40 but should not be taken if your BMI is over 40.
- Migraine. You should not take the COC pill if you have severe migraine attacks (lasting over 3 days despite treatment) or you get regular attacks of migraine especially if you get aura or a warning sign before an attack e.g. tingling in fingers, blurred vision, feeling sick.
- High blood pressure.
- Had a blood clot or stroke in the past.
- Have a close relative who has had a blood clot when less than 45 years old.
- Immobile for a long time (e.g. in a wheelchair, leg in plaster).

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer has been found very slightly more often in women who take the COC pill than in women of the same age who do not. For women 35 years or younger who are not on the COC pill, the risk of breast cancer is 4 women out of 2,000. If the COC pill is taken, the risk increases to 5 women out of 2,000. If the COC pill is stopped, the risk of breast cancer reduces so that 10 years after stopping, the risk is the same as if you had never taken the COC pill.

Endometrial and Ovarian Cancer

The COC pill gives protection against developing cancers of the endometrium (lining of the womb) and the ovaries.

Vomiting

If you vomit within 2 hours of taking a COC pill, it may not have been fully absorbed into the bloodstream. Take another pill straight away and the next pill at your usual time. You should still be protected from pregnancy. However, if you continue to be you sick, you may not be protected from pregnancy. Speak to your GP or family planning nurse or call NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting 0845 46 47 end_of_the_skype_highlighting for advice.

Diarrhoea

Very severe diarrhoea (6-8 watery stools in 24 hours) may reduce the effectiveness of the COC pill. Keep taking as normal but treat each day that you have very severe diarrhoea as if you had forgotten to take a pill. See section on "Missed doses and extra doses" or speak to your GP or family planning nurse or call NHS Direct on 0845

Surgery

Due to the risk of developing blood clots, you should stop taking the COC pill at least 4 weeks before a major operation (e.g. joint replacement, hysterectomy), any surgery to the legs or treatment for varicose veins. You should not start taking it again until at least 2 weeks after you are completely mobile.

There is no need to stop taking the COC pill before minor surgery (e.g. tooth extraction or surgery involving a short duration of anaesthetic).

Travel

There is an increased risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) (clot in the leg) during travel if you are taking the COC pill and are immobile for long periods (particularly long haul flights over 5 hours). You can help to prevent a DVT by drinking plenty of water, avoiding alcohol as it can lead to dehydration, performing simple leg exercises (e.g.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

The COC pill will not protect you from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis. Consider using condoms as well taking the COC pill.

Breast Feeding

The COC pill may reduce your flow of milk. It is recommended that you use a different method of contraception (e.g. the progestogen only pill or condoms) for the first 6 months of breastfeeding.

Pregnancy

The COC pill should not be taken during pregnancy. If you think you could be pregnant, stop taking the COC pill and speak to your GP or Family Planning Clinic.

Side effects

The Combined Oral Contraceptive (COC) pill is generally well tolerated and few women will experience side effects.

Some of the side effects reported include:

- breakthrough bleeding and spotting - especially during the first 3 months of taking,
- breast tenderness and breast enlargement,
- change in shape of the cornea (front covering of the eye) resulting in discomfort when wearing contact lenses,
- depression (low mood),
- fluid retention,
- headache,
- migraine,
- nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting (being sick),
- reduced libido (interest in sex),
- rise in blood pressure,
- rise in blood sugar,
- stomach upset,
- temporary infertility after stopping the COC pill,
- vaginal thrush,
- weight gain.

Ability to Drive:

The COC pill does not affect your ability to drive.

Interactions

The Combined Oral Contraceptive (COC) pill may interact with other medicines. Some of the more commonly known interactions are listed below. However, this is not a complete list. If you want to check that your medicines are safe to take with the COC pill, you can ask your doctor or pharmacist (chemist) or read the Patient Information Leaflets that come with your medicines.

The COC pill may interact with **broad spectrum antibiotics**. These include the following:

- amoxicillin,
- ampicillin,
- azithromycin,
- cefadroxil,
- cefixime,
- cefradine,
- cefalexin,
- cefpodoxime,
- clarithromycin,
- co-amoxiclav,
- co-fluampicil,
- doxycycline,

- erythromycin,
- metronidazole,
- minocycline,
- oxytetracycline,
- tetracycline, and
- tinidazole.

Broad spectrum antibiotics may reduce the effectiveness of the COC pill.

If you are prescribed one of these antibiotics, use additional contraception (e.g. condoms) while you are taking the antibiotic and for 7 days after finishing the course. If the 7 days runs beyond the end of a pill pack, skip the pill free break and start a new pack straight away. In the case of the Every Day (ED) pill - if the 7 days runs into the inactive pills, skip the inactive pills and start a new pack straight away.

If you are prescribed a long course of one of these antibiotics, after you have taken it for 3 weeks or more you don't need additional contraception. But, if you are then also prescribed a short course of a different antibiotic later, you will need to use additional contraception again as above.

The COC pill may also interact with **medicines that speed up how quickly the liver breaks down oestrogen and progestogen**. These include:

- aprepitant,
- bosentan,
- carbamazepine,
- griseofulvin,
- modafinil,
- nelfinavir,
- nevirapine,
- oxcarbazepine,
- phenytoin,
- phenobarbital,
- primidone,
- rifabutin,
- rifampicin,
- ritonavir,
- rufinamide,
- St John's Wort (Hypericum), and
- topiramate.

As these medicines speed up the process of the liver breaking down the oestrogen and progestogen in the COC pill, they reduce the effectiveness of the COC pill.

If you are prescribed a short course of one of these medicines, use additional contraception while you are taking the medicine, and for four weeks after you stop taking it.

If you are prescribed a long course of one of the above medicines, remind your prescriber that you are taking a COC pill. You will need to think about switching to another method of contraception while you are taking it, and for 4-8 weeks after you stop taking it.

Talk to your GP, or prescriber, about other methods of contraception. An alternative (except when taking rifampicin, or rifabutin) is to take two COC pills a day. However, this is an unlicensed use of the COC pill and it should only be taken in this way on the advice of your GP.

Lamotrigine

The combined oral contraceptive (COC) pill can speed up how quickly the liver breaks down lamotrigine. This reduces the amount of lamotrigine in the blood, making it less effective at controlling fits. Tell your GP if you decide to start (or stop) taking the COC pill because your dose of lamotrigine may need to be adjusted.

Missed or extra dosage

If you forget to take a COC pill or are more than 24hours late taking it, the advice depends on:

- What type of COC pill you are taking (see section on "Names" for the type of COC pill),
- How many pills you have forgotten to take,
- If you have had sex without using another form of contraception during the last 7 days.

Low strength oestrogen - 21 day COC pill

If you are taking Loestrin 20, Mercilon, Femodette or Sunya 20/75 and you have missed one pill, you do not need to worry.

Take the missed pill as soon as you remember and the remaining pills as normal. This may mean taking two pills on the same day or even at the same time (one at the time of remembering and one at the usual time).

- You do not need to use any additional contraception.
- If you have had sex without using another form of contraception - you do not need emergency contraception.

However, if you are taking Loestrin 20, Mercilon, Femodette or Sunya 20/75 and you have missed two or more pills (48 hours or more without taking a pill), then:

- Take the last pill you missed now and the remaining pills as normal. This may mean taking two pills on the same day or even at the same time (one at the time of remembering and one at the usual time).
- If you have less than seven pills left in your pack, finish the pack but skip the pill free break and start a new pack the next day. This may mean you don't get a bleed until the end of the second pack. If you don't get a bleed by then, speak to your doctor straight away.
- Use additional contraception (such as condoms) for the next seven days.

- If you have had sex without using another form of contraception within the last 7 days - you may need emergency contraception.

Standard strength oestrogen - 28 day or Every Day (ED) COC pill

If you are taking Femodene ED, Logynon ED or Microgynon 30 ED, and have missed one or two active pills or any number of the inactive pills (last 7 pills in the pack), you do not need to worry.

Take the last pill you missed now, and the remaining pills as normal. This may mean taking two pills on the same day or even at the same time (one at the time of remembering and one at the usual time).

- You do not need to use any additional contraception.
- If you have had sex without using another form of contraception - you do not need emergency contraception.