YOUR GUIDE TO

The combined pill

Helping you choose the method of contraception that is best for you
The combined pill

The combined pill is usually just called the pill. It contains two hormones – oestrogen and progestogen.

These are similar to the natural hormones women produce in their ovaries.

There are a variety of types of combined pill.

Questions & Answers

How effective is the pill? .................................................. 3
How does the pill work? .................................................. 4
Where can I get the pill? .................................................. 4
Can anyone use the pill? .................................................. 4
What are the advantages of the pill? .............................. 5
What are the disadvantages of the pill? ......................... 5
What are the risks of taking the pill? ............................. 5
Are all combined pills the same? .................................. 7
How do I use Everyday pills? ......................................... 8
What if I want to change to a different pill? .................. 8
How to take your 21 day pills and phasic pills .............. 9
Am I protected during the seven day break? ................. 10
What makes the pill less effective? .............................. 10
What if I miss a pill and there are less than seven pills left in the pack? .................................................. 11

How effective is the pill?

How effective any contraceptive is depends on how old you are, how often you have sex and whether you follow the instructions.

If 100 sexually active women don’t use any contraception, 80 to 90 will become pregnant in a year.

If the pill is taken according to instructions it is over 99% effective. This means that less than 1 woman in 100 will get pregnant in a year.

If the pill is not taken according to instructions, more women will become pregnant.
How does the pill work?
The main way the pill works is:

- It stops your ovaries releasing an egg each month (ovulation).

It also:

- thickens the mucus from your cervix. This makes it difficult for sperm to move through it and reach an egg.
- makes the lining of your womb thinner so it is less likely to accept a fertilised egg.

Where can I get the pill?
Family planning doctors, nurses and most GPs provide contraception. You can go to any other GP if you prefer not to see your own doctor. (See page 14).

Can anyone use the pill?
Not everyone can use the combined pill and your doctor or nurse will need to ask you about your own and your family's medical history. Do mention any illness or operations you have had. Some of the conditions which may mean you should not use the combined pill are:

- you think you might already be pregnant
- you smoke and are 35 or older

You have now or have had in the past:

- thrombosis (blood clots) in any vein or artery
- a heart abnormality or circulatory disease, including raised blood pressure
- very severe migraines or migraines with aura
- breast cancer
- active disease of the liver or gall bladder
- diabetes
- unexplained bleeding from your vagina (for example, between periods or after sex).

What are the advantages of the pill?
Some of the advantages of the pill are:

- it doesn't interfere with sex
- usually makes your periods shorter, lighter and less painful
- can help with pre-menstrual symptoms
- protects against two types of cancer - cancer of the ovary and cancer of the womb
- protects against some pelvic infections
- reduces the risk of fibroids (tumours in the womb that are not cancer), ovarian cysts and breast disease that is not cancer

What are the disadvantages of the pill?
You may get temporary side-effects when you first start the pill. These side-effects include:

- headaches
- weight gain or loss
- nausea
- breast tenderness
- bleeding between periods
- mood changes

These side-effects should stop within three months. If not, changing your type of pill may help.

- The pill may increase your blood pressure.
- The pill does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections so you may need to use condoms as well.

What are the risks of taking the pill?
The pill can have some serious side-effects, but these are rare.

A very small number of women may develop a blood clot which can block a vein (venous thrombosis) or an artery (arterial thrombosis or heart attack or stroke). If you have ever had a
thrombosis, you should not use the pill. Some types of pill appear to be associated with a slightly higher risk of venous thrombosis.

The risk of venous thrombosis is greatest if any of the following apply to you: you are very overweight, are immobile (use a wheelchair), have severe varicose veins or a member of your immediate family had a venous thrombosis before they were 45.

The risk of arterial thrombosis is greatest if any of the following apply to you: you smoke, are diabetic, have high blood pressure, are very overweight, or a member of your immediate family had a heart attack or stroke before they were 45.

- Research shows that women who take the combined pill have an increased risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer. This risk disappears over a ten-year period after stopping the pill. Studies are being done to see why this occurs, and how it relates to pill use, or if women taking the pill are diagnosed earlier than women who don't take the pill.

- There is also some research to suggest a link between using the pill and developing cervical cancer.

- Some research suggests a link between using the combined pill and developing a very rare liver cancer.

- Over the years the pill has often been blamed for side-effects which were due to other causes. For most women the benefits of the pill outweigh the possible risks.

See a doctor straightaway if you have any of the following:

- pain in the chest, including any sharp pain which is worse when you breathe in

- breathlessness or you cough up blood

- painful swelling in your leg(s)

- weakness, numbness, or bad "pins and needles" of an arm or leg

- severe stomach pains

- a bad fainting attack or you collapse

- unusual headaches or migraines that are worse than usual

- sudden problems with your speech or eyesight

- jaundice (yellowing skin or yellowing eyes).

Are all combined pills the same?

No, there are many different types of pill.

- 21 day pill – You take one pill a day for 21 days then no pills for the next seven days. Each pill has the same amount of hormone in it (these are called monophasic pills). This is the most common type of pill.

The different names of monophasic 21 day pills:

- BREVINOR
- EUGYNON 30
- FEMODETE
- LOESTRIN 30
- MERCILON
- MINULET
- NORINYL-1
- OVRAZ 30
- OVYSMEN

- CILEST
- FEMODENE
- LOESTRIN 20
- MARVELON
- MICROGYNON 30
- NORIMIN
- OVRAZ
- OVRAZETTE

Some of these pills are identical to each other but they are made by different manufacturers.

- Phasic pills – You have two or three sections of different coloured pills in the pack. They contain different amounts of hormone so you must take
them in the right order. You take one pill a day for 21 days then no pills for the next seven days.

The different names of phasic 21 day pills:
- BINOVUM
- SYNPHASE
- TRINOVUM
- TRI-MINULET

Some of these pills are identical to each other but they are made by different manufacturers.

- EveryDay pill – You take one pill a day for 28 days with no break between packets. There are 21 active pills and seven inactive pills which don’t contain any hormones. You must take these pills in the right order.

The different names of EveryDay pills:
- FEMODENE ED
- MICROGYNON 30 ED

How do I use EveryDay pills?
It is very important to take these pills in order as seven of the pills are inactive. Always start with the first pill from the red part of the pack. When you finish a pack you should start another pack the next day.

If you take the first pill of Microgynon 30 ED on the first day of your period you are protected from day one. With the other EveryDay pills you will be protected from day 15 if you take the first pill on the first day of your period. So you need to use an extra contraceptive method for the first 14 days.

What if I want to change to a different pill?
Talk to your doctor or nurse about this as you may need to use an extra contraceptive method for a short time when you change.

How to take your 21 day pills and phasic pills

- Starting the first pack
  - Take the first pill on the first day of your next period.
  - You will be protected at once.
  - If you are told to start on any other day, you will not be protected for the first 7 days. So use a condom until then.

  - Take your first pill from the bubble marked with the correct day of the week.
  - Try to take it at the same time every day.
  - Take a pill every day for 21 days.

Then stop for 7 days. You should bleed during some of these 7 days.

- You are protected during the 7 day break if you have taken all the 21 pills correctly and you start the next pack on time.

Start your next pack on the eighth day (the same day of the week as you took your first pill). Do this whether or not you are still bleeding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Day number</th>
<th>Take pill</th>
<th>Protected from pregnancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>