



The Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill

Choosing a Method of Contraception

This is one of our series of leaflets that outlines some of the different methods of contraception available, and gives you information on the advantages and disadvantages of each. Leaflets in this series include:

The Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill

The Mini Pill

Intrauterine Contraceptive Devices

Emergency Contraception

Implants and Injectable Contraception

We have also produced information leaflets on:

Safe Sex and Sexually Transmitted Infections

Prepregnancy Advice

Our leaflets are designed to give an overview of the various topics. We also stock more detailed information leaflets on a wide range of women's health issues.



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The Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill



There are several contraceptive pills available in Ireland. Most contain a combination of two hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. The progesterone-only pill or “Mini Pill” is described in a separate information leaflet.

What is it?

The combined oral contraceptive pill, often simply called “the Pill”, contains oestrogen and progesterone. There are different amounts of oestrogen and different types of progesterone depending on the particular pill.

How effective is it?

When used carefully, it is more than 99% effective. All combined pills are equally effective – those with less oestrogen are just as good for contraception as those with higher doses of oestrogen.

How does it work?

It prevents ovulation (the release of an egg each month) and therefore fertilisation can not take place.

Who is it suitable for?

The combined contraceptive pill is suitable for most women. However those who get severe migraines, have had blood clots in the past, are very overweight or have high blood pressure should not take this type of pill. Women who are 35 or older should not take this pill if they are smokers. In some cases women with a family history of breast cancer should avoid oestrogen containing contraceptives.

Side effects

Most women will have some side effects when they start taking the pill. This is due to the hormones in the pill, particularly the progesterone component. Common side effects include headaches, breast tenderness, mood swings, bloating, nausea and leg cramps. Decreased sex drive and acne can also occur. If you get any of these side effects, they usually settle within a few weeks. Very rarely, more severe side effects may occur. Please consult the back panel of this leaflet.

How do I take it?

Take the first pill on the first day of your period and then continue to take one pill at approximately the same time every day to finish the pack. A pack of pills contains 21 tablets. At the end of the pack, take a seven day break. During this time you will get a period. Then restart the pill after the seven day break.

When is it safe to have sex?

If you start the pill on the first day of your period, you are protected immediately. However, you may start up to day five of your period in which case you will not be safe for contraception until you have taken the first seven pills, i.e one week later.

What if I forget to take a pill?

If you are less than 12 hours late, don't worry.

If you are more than 12 hours late taking your pill:

- take the pill you have forgotten immediately
- continue taking your pills at the usual time (this may mean taking two pills together if you have forgotten a pill for 24 hours),
- you are not safe for contraception for one week.

- If you do not have seven pills left in your pack you should run two packs of pills together and not take the seven day break. Continue to the end of the second pack and then take the usual seven day break

What else reduces the effectiveness of the pill?

If you have an upset stomach with vomiting and/or diarrhoea you may not be protected. Continue taking your pills but use another form of contraception until seven days after the stomach upset has settled. Antibiotics may interfere with the absorption of the pill. You should continue to take the contraceptive pill while on antibiotics but you are not safe for contraception while taking antibiotics and for seven days after the course is finished. If you are prescribed any medication, you should inform the doctor that you are on the pill so that s/he can advise you whether or not the medication will cause problems with the pill.

Do I need check-ups?

On the first visit we will prescribe the pill for three months and then review to see if you have any problems or questions. If you are happy with the pill we will then give you a six month prescription. If you are experiencing any side effects, we will discuss changing to a different pill to see if this is more suitable for you.

Nuvaring

Nuvaring has been available since 2004.

It is a contraceptive device that is similar to the oral contraceptive pill in that it also contains oestrogen and progesterone. Therefore it is suitable for those who can take the combined contraceptive pill.

The ring is made of a flexible material that slowly releases hormones over a three week period. It is inserted into the vagina by the patient and is left in place for three weeks. The ring is removed for one week and then replaced with a new ring – similar to the seven day break with the contraceptive pill.

Evra

Evra has also been available since 2004.

It is a contraceptive patch that contains oestrogen and progesterone. One patch is applied to the skin per week. On week four no patch is applied – similar to the seven day break with the contraceptive pill.

Both Nuvaring and Evra are as effective for contraception as contraceptive pills. Women who do not remember to take pills on time may find these alternative delivery systems useful.

Rare oestrogen side effects

You should see a doctor immediately if you experience any of the following:

- Severe pain in one or both legs
- Swelling in one or both legs
- Sudden or severe chest pain or breathlessness
- Changed pattern of migraine
- Sudden loss of speech or sight
- Loss of power or sensation in a limb

The above symptoms may indicate that a blood clot has developed for example in the leg or the lungs.