

Updated information on how to take the Combined Oral Contraceptive Pill

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What's new?

- Evidence shows that the 7 day break from taking the pill makes it a less reliable contraceptive method. New recommendations suggest no more than a 4 day break.
- Taking the pill for longer periods without a break is safe and reliable.
- Four possible options are recommended, you can choose depending on personal preference:
 - Continuous (365) – take the pill every day of the year without a break
 - 63/4 – take 3 packs of pills back to back followed by a 4 day break
 - 84/4 – take 4 packs of pills back to back followed by a 4 day break
 - 21/4 – take 1 pack of pills followed by a 4 day break, if you prefer a period every month

What are the benefits for me?

- This way of taking the pill makes it work better to stop pregnancy.
- It reduces problems such as period pain, PMT, migraine and other headaches
- It means you don't have to have regular monthly bleeds, which have no known benefits.
- It's convenient for when you want to avoid bleeding e.g. for holidays and special occasions

How do I take the pill continuously?

- Start your pill on the correct day of the week as shown on the strip
- Take one pill at the same time each day, at a time that is easy for you to remember.
- Take all the pills in that strip, and then start the next strip without a break. Keep doing this until you have 2 days of bleeding next to each other – this might be light spotting or heavier bleeding.

- If you have 2 days of bleeding, stop your pill for 4 days then go back on it as before.
- During your 4 day break, put the pills you are missing into a small container. That way you can see when to restart when you have 4 pills in there, and you can take the pills in your next pack so they aren't wasted.
- Please don't flush your 4 pills from your break down the toilet or sink – they can affect wildlife and they don't need to be wasted
- If you are planning to have a 4 day gap after 3 or 4 packs of pills, then stop taking your pill as you have planned. You will bleed at the end of the 4 day gap, or sometimes in the first few days of your new pill packet.

This leaflet is intended to support and not replace a consultation with an appropriate healthcare professional

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Isn't it better for me to have "periods" every month?

- Modern contraception is very safe and women do not need to bleed every month to know that they are not pregnant.
- The "period" whilst on the pill is completely artificial and is just your womb's response to stopping the pill for a few days. It is called a "hormone withdrawal bleed".
- Continuous pill taking just stops you having what is now understood to be a bleed that you don't need.

What happens if I get bleeding while taking the pill continuously?

- Irregular bleeding and/or 'spotting' can occur, but most women find this lessens over time.
- If the bleeding lasts for 2 days, take a 4 day break.
- Then restart your pill and take it every day until you next have bleeding.
- After this continue as before. Having this 4-day break after 2 days of bleeding usually works to stop or improve the bleeding, but if it does not settle you should contact the surgery in case you need a check-up to rule out other causes. If you get bleeding more often than once a month, please also go back to your surgery; taking more than one 4-day break in a month can make the pill less effective.
- Some women will only bleed once or twice a year with this way of taking the pill; others will bleed every few months. Your body will settle into its own pattern and either way is safe.

Managing missed or late pills

If you miss 6 pills or less:

- You can miss up to six pills and still be protected against pregnancy, even if you had sex in that week.
- Restart your strip of pills straight away.
- No need for emergency contraception.
- Continue with the next strip without any more breaks in pill taking.

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If you miss 7 pills or more:

- You may require emergency contraception so please contact surgery/OOH
- You should then restart the pill and use condoms or abstain from sex for seven days.
- You should do a pregnancy test after 3 weeks.

What if I have vomiting and/or severe diarrhoea?

- No extra precautions unless either or both last for 7 days
- Contact the surgery if this is the case
- In the mean time continue taking the pill.

If I take other medicines will it affect my pill?

Contact the surgery if you plan to start any new medications whilst you are taking the pill.

How often should I come back for follow up?

- Once you are settled on the pill you usually only need an annual check for any changes to your medical history, family history, drug history or allergies. You will also have your blood pressure and possibly your weight and height checked.
- If at any other time you have any questions, have a problem or want to switch methods please contact the surgery

Off-licence prescription

- Please note that this is an "off license" prescription. Yet it is supported by medical authorities in the UK and by the WHO
- Prescribing off-license is as safe as taking the pill in the standard way because we still follow medical guidelines

With thanks to Dr Jo Raikes and Dr Liz Galpin for their hard work on this leaflet & giving NB Medical permission to use it

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