

Benefits of Birth Control Pills

Did you know that there are multiple health benefits from taking the birth control pill (oral contraceptive, or OC) in addition to not getting pregnant? Many women still worry that the pill is bad for them, but in recent years the pill has been improved and refined. The amount of hormone in today's pills has been drastically reduced while the understanding of its effects on the body has increased.

Some Risk Remains

If you smoke, the pill can increase your risk of stroke and heart attack. Taking the pill can also raise blood pressure in some women and poses a slight risk of increased blood clotting for women with a personal or family history of clotting. The vast majority of women today, however, can feel safe in taking birth control pills and even enjoy benefits to their health.

What May Improve?

Excess hair (hirsutism) and **acne** are commonly improved in pill users because androgens and testosterone are suppressed by oral contraceptives. Abnormally high androgen levels are present in 90 percent of young women with acne. High androgen levels can also cause darkening of facial and body hair, especially on the chin, chest, and abdomen.

Heavy and irregular **menstrual bleeding** patterns are significantly improved on the pill, which also decreases the risk of iron deficiency anemia. Iron deficiency **anemia** is a condition in which the levels of iron in red blood cells in circulation are low, resulting in loss of energy and fatigue.

Help with Cramps and Cysts

Menstrual pain and cramping are greatly reduced by oral contraceptives resulting in less time away from school, work, and fun activities.

The pill is also useful in treating **endometriosis**, a condition in which tissue resembling the uterine lining occurs abnormally in various locations in the pelvic cavity. Endometriosis is associated with severe cramps and infertility.

The risk of developing **ovarian cysts** is greatly reduced for OC users because the pill helps prevent ovulation. An ovarian cyst is a fluid-filled growth that can develop in the ovary during ovulation (the release of an egg from an ovary).

Protection against ovarian cysts is very important since these growths may enlarge, or even burst, and may require surgery.

What About Breast Effects?

Fibrocystic breast changes occur when the milk-producing glands in the breast become thick and form non-cancerous **breast lumps** often causing discomfort and alarm and sometimes surgical intervention. This condition is less common in pill users than nonusers. Some pill users notice fullness in the breasts and mild tenderness. Currently, there is no strong medical evidence that women with a family history of breast cancer should avoid using the pill.

It Protects Against Cancer

Protection against uterine (endometrial) **cancer** and ovarian cancer is probably one of the most important health benefits of oral contraceptives. Using the pill for 1 year or more considerably reduces the risk of developing endometrial cancer. The risk of developing ovarian cancer is reduced with only 3 to 6 months of OC use. Protection against these cancers increases with continued pill use and is thought to continue for at least 15 years after pill use is stopped.

And Infertility

Oral contraceptives have been found to reduce incidence of **PID** (pelvic inflammatory disease), a serious bacterial infection of the fallopian tubes and uterus that can result in severe pain and potentially, infertility. Condoms, however, provide more effective protection against STDs like chlamydia and gonorrhea, which are common causes of PID. The pill thickens cervical mucus, which acts as a barrier that helps to prevent bacteria from entering the cervix. By reducing the risk of PID, OCs also reduces the risk of **ectopic pregnancy**, a potentially serious emergency. An ectopic pregnancy occurs when a fertilized egg develops outside the uterus, often inside one of the tubes. This is sometimes caused by infections and scarring from PID.

These positive health benefits apply to women throughout their reproductive years, from the time of first menstruation until they reach menopause. These benefits can have long-term impact even after pill use is stopped.

