

Oral Contraceptives

Oral contraceptive is a highly reliable non-permanent means for contraception. Proper medication can achieve a successful rate of contraception as high as 98% or above.

How do oral contraceptive pills achieve contraception?

- (1) preventing ovum development and ovulation;
- (2) suppressing development of uterine lining and discouraging implantation of eggs; and
- (3) maintaining the viscosity of cervical mucus and making it difficult for sperms to reach the eggs in the uterus.

Composition and Classification of Oral Contraceptive Pills

Oral contraceptive pills can be divided into the following two categories according to their composition:

- (a) Mixture of oestrogen and progestogen

These pills can prevent the development of eggs and ovulation, thus preventing pregnancy in women. Their composition is designed to resemble the endocrine cycle of women and all such pills are taken on a 28-day cycle. They are available in 21-pill and 28-pill packs:

- * 21-pill packs are hormonal pills. You have to wait seven days after consumption of one pack before starting the second pack.
- * 28-pill packs contain seven non-hormonal pills in addition to 21 hormonal pills.

When you are taking non-hormonal pills or waiting in between medication, menstruation will start, once in every 28 days. Generally, menstruation comes in very regularly and the flow volume is relatively low.

- (b) Progesterone

Such pills contain only small amount of progesterone with the major function of maintaining the viscosity of cervical mucus, making it difficult for the sperms to enter the uterus. They can also discourage implantation of eggs. Users should take one pill per day without any break. Menstruation date is difficult to

anticipate.

Side Effects of Oral Contraceptive Pills

Oral contraceptive pills nowadays are highly safe to use but they are not free from side effects, such as headache, stomachache, nausea, breast tenderness, changes in weight and sex desire and depressed mood, though such effects would generally subside in several months' time. Taking contraceptive pills may also increase risk of thrombosis, a rare and yet not-to-be-ignored disease among the Asians. As a result, not all women are suitable for taking contraceptive pills and medical advice is required for the sake of safety.

Use and Choice of Contraceptive Pills

Different preparations contain different dosage of hormones to suit different physical conditions among women. First-time users should consult healthcare professionals and undergo physical examination to confirm their suitability of using contraceptive pills. The appropriate choice of preparation and prescription time are then discussed and decided. Users should keep regular contact with their healthcare professionals during medication for follow-up consultations and identification of adverse effects, if any. As a result, regular physical check-up, normally once a year, is required for ensuring safety.

Contraindications

Women should not take contraceptive pills if they are:

1. suffering from arterial/venous blood clots or having a medical history or symptoms of thrombosis such as heart disease, stroke and blood clots in vessels supplying the legs or the lungs;
2. suffering from liver disease or hepatic disorder;
3. suspected or confirmed patients of breast or genital organ cancer;
4. suffering from vaginal bleeding of unknown reasons; and
5. smokers aged 35 or above.

Women may take conceptive pills only under the supervision of healthcare professionals if they are:

1. suffering from hemicrania;
2. suffering from jaundice;
3. suffering from hypertension;
4. having a medical history of diabetes or gestational diabetes; and
5. aged 45 or above.

Warning Signs

Any physical signs of unknown reasons during medication, such as sudden pain, may be related to the use of contraceptive pills. Consult your doctor as soon as possible.

Points to Note

Seek advice from your healthcare professionals if any of the following occurs during medication:

1. You have missed a dose or taken a wrong dose;
2. You are going to receive a surgery or require prolonged bed rest in the coming one or two months' time;
3. You have to take other drugs as well and in particular, antispasmodics, antibiotics or tranquillizers (as certain drugs may interfere with the effect of contraceptive pills);
4. Vomiting or diarrhoea persists for more than 24 hours (as gastrointestinal discomfort may hinder absorption of contraceptive pills); and
5. Menstruation does not start one week after you have taken non-hormonal pills or stopped medication.

Storage of Conceptive Pills

Contraceptive pills should be stored in a dry and cool place. They do not need to be refrigerated. Also, they should be stored properly to avoid accidents of mistaken consumption by children.