

Continuous Pill Taking

This leaflet should be read *with* the latest FPA Leaflet ‘Your Guide to the Combined Pill’ (available at www.fpa.org.uk/contraception-help/combined-pill)

- Please note that the advice on this leaflet replaces the advice in the FPA leaflet about “how to take your pill”

What does Continuous Pill Taking mean?

- This is a way of taking the pill without taking a regular ‘pill free break’ (of 7 days off after every 21 days of pill), during which you would usually have a bleed.
- This is an ‘off licence’ prescription, which means that the instructions are different from those recommended by the manufacturer. There is evidence that continuous pill taking is safe and it is supported by medical authorities in the UK (FSRH).

What are the benefits?

- There is a lot of evidence that Continuous Pill Taking makes your pill a much more effective contraceptive. We know that not taking tablets for 7 days weakens the pill’s main effect of preventing your ovaries from releasing an egg; so it makes egg release more likely if you then miss any pills.
- You don’t need to have regular monthly bleeds, which have no known medical benefits, and by taking the pill continuously you stop having a regular monthly bleed.
- There is a reduction in other potential problems such as period pain, PMT, migraine and other headaches, and more.
- It’s convenient for when you want to avoid bleeding e.g. for holidays and special occasions.

How do I take the pill continuously?

1: Start your pill on the correct day of the week (as shown on the strip).

2: Take one pill at about the same time each day, at a time that is easy for you to remember.

3: Take all the pills in that strip, **and then start the next strip without a break.**

4: Keep taking the strips without a break.

How long can I take the pill continuously for?

As long as you want – until either you choose another method, you want to stop contraception to conceive, or your clinic advises you to change method.

Isn’t it better for me to have a ‘period’ every month?

- Continuous pill taking is very safe and women do not need to bleed every month.
- The ‘period’ on the pill is entirely artificial and it is just your womb’s response to stopping the pill (and therefore the hormones) for a few days. It is called a ‘hormone withdrawal bleed’. It does not show that you are not pregnant.
- Continuous pill-taking just stops you having that unnecessary regular bleed.

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

- Irregular bleeding and/or ‘spotting’ during the first months of contraception, including continuous pill taking, can occur, but most women find this lessens over time.
- If the bleeding is troublesome to you, e.g. continues for more than a few days, and has not settled after at least a month since you first started the pill; **stop** taking tablets for **just 4 days.**
 - Unless you also missed other tablets for any reason in the previous week, there is no need to take extra precautions when you take a 4 day break.
 - **Then restart your pill** taking the correct pill for that day, leaving out the 4 unused pills.
 - Continue as before. If you find this 4-day break does not stop or improve the bleeding, seek advice from your clinic in case you need a check-up to exclude other causes of bleeding e.g. a sexually transmitted infection.

OTHER POINTS ABOUT CONTINUOUS PILL TAKING

How do I start this pill?

- You should start the pill up to, and including, the fifth day of your period and you will be protected from pregnancy immediately.
- You can start any pill straight away if you are already on a safe method such as the implant, injection or the IUD or IUS.

Missed or late pills during continuous use

- Missed **less than 7 pills** in a row:

As long as you have taken **7 or more pills in a row before you miss a pill**, you don't need emergency contraception: you will still be protected against pregnancy, even if you had sex since you took your last pill

- What to do:
 - Restart your strip of pills straight away.
 - Continue with the next strip without any more breaks in pill taking.

If you have taken less than 7 pills in a row before missing your pills, you might need to discuss emergency contraception

- Please contact or attend a clinic.
 - You should restart the pill and use condoms or abstain from sex for seven days.
 - You should do a pregnancy test after 3 weeks.
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 - Please contact or attend a clinic.
 - You should 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 (being sick) and/or severe diarrhoea?

These might stop you from absorbing pills properly but as long as you have been taking the pill continuously for 7 days beforehand:

- You don't need to take extra precautions unless the diarrhoea and /or vomiting last for 7 days. (If they do, see your doctor)
- Continue taking a pill each day

If I take other medicines will it affect my pill?

- If you are prescribed any medication, always inform the prescriber that you are taking the combined pill because a few drugs can make it less effective. St John's Wort, which you can buy from the chemist, may also reduce the effectiveness of the pill.
- Normal painkillers and antibiotics do not affect how the pill works.

How often should I come back for follow up?

- Once you are settled on the pill you usually only need a check once a year to see if there have been any changes to your health, your family's health, your other medication or allergies. You should also have your blood pressure measured and your weight and height checked.
- If at any other time you have any questions, have a problem or want to switch methods, make an appointment with your clinic for review.

*What is an "off licence" prescription?

All medicines have a product licence. The licence tells us under which conditions the medicine can be prescribed for patients. However, if expert medical opinion is that a medicine can also be used in other ways or under different conditions, this is called prescribing "off-licence" and is allowed by medical governing bodies. Prescribing the contraceptive pill off-licence is supported by The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Health (FSRH)

[This leaflet was adapted from one written by John Guillebaud and Anne MacGregor, based on a version developed by Punam Rubenstein, Ulrike Sauer and Jill Zelin, with thanks. January 2019]