

THE MINIPILL (Progestogen – Only Pill)

The minipill contains a very small amount of only one hormone, progestogen. There is no oestrogen and no inactive (sugar) pills in each packet unlike the combined oral contraceptive pill. It also has a lower dose of progestogen than the combined oral contraceptive pill and therefore may have fewer side effects in some women.

HOW DOES IT WORK? The Minipill makes the mucus around the cervix thicker. This makes it harder for the sperm to enter the uterus. It also affects the transport of the egg through the fallopian tubes. It changes the lining of the uterus, which may affect a woman's menstrual cycle. In some women it can stop the monthly release of an egg cell (ovulation), but this is unpredictable. The Minipill prevents pregnancy but is not quite as effective as the combined pill.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT? Minipills are 87-99% effective, slightly less than the combined oral contraceptive pill. The large variation in reliability often depends on how the minipill is taken. For maximum reliability the minipill should be taken at EXACTLY the same time each day. There is no pill-free week and should be taken even during menstruation (a period). The maximum effectiveness is between 3-21 hours. It is recommended that a time be chosen for taking the pill so it is at least 3 hours before intercourse but not more than 21 hours. If you tend to have intercourse at night, then take it in the morning or midday, but if you tend to have intercourse in the morning, then take it in the early evening or before you go to bed.

HOW DO I START THE MINIPILL? If you are having periods, take the first pill on the first day of your period. Take one pill daily at the same time, even during your period. As soon as you finish one pack, begin the next one. Start the next pack even if you are still bleeding or not started a period. If you are not having periods (eg. while breast feeding) you can start at any time. You will have some protection from pregnancy within three hours of taking your first pill, but it may be a week before you have full protection. Because of this you should use back-up contraception (eg. condoms) for 7 days after starting the minipill.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I MISS A MINIPILL?

3 or more hours late: Take the pill as soon as you remember, but use extra protection for 48 hours (eg. condoms).

1 pill missed: Take the pill as soon as you remember then take the next one at the usual time. This means you may take 2 in the same day. Use extra protection for 2 weeks.

2 pills missed: Take 2 pills each day for the next 2 days. Use extra protection for 2 weeks. You may have some spotting or bleeding.

3 or more pills missed: Use extra protection but see your doctor.

You may need to take emergency contraception ("the morning after pill") if you have had intercourse even after missing one pill. This is available, without prescription, from the pharmacy and should be taken as soon as possible.

Similarly, if you have diarrhoea, vomiting or fever, the minipill may not get absorbed properly and additional precautions should be used in the same way. Some medications may make the minipill less effective. Ask your doctor about this. Anti-seizure and tuberculosis drugs can certainly make the minipill less effective as well as herbal preparations, eg. St John's Wort.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS?

The most common side effect is irregular bleeding or missed periods. If you do not bleed for 60 days, see your doctor. If the minipill fails, you should see your doctor immediately. There is a higher chance of ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy in the fallopian tube). This is rare but it is dangerous. Pregnancy is more likely to occur in the uterus but you need to be aware of the risk of ectopic pregnancy. The minipill may also increase the risk of ovarian cysts.

However, women who take the minipill have a decreased risk of uterine cancer and PID (pelvic inflammatory disease), less menstrual pain and less blood loss.

It does not protect against sexually transmitted infections. Use condoms to protect against STIs.

WHO IS SUITABLE FOR THE MINIPILL?

- Women who are breastfeeding may use the Minipill as it has little or no effect on the breast milk.
- Women who get side effects from oestrogen, eg. headaches, nausea, high blood pressure, weight gain.
- Women who cannot take oestrogen for health reasons - >35 years of age, smokers, heart disease, blood clots (DVT, Pulmonary embolus).
- Women who request the lowest dose of hormones.

WHO IS NOT SUITABLE? Women with unexplained vaginal bleeding, known or suspected pregnancy, breast cancer or severe depression.

HEALTH ADVICE Arrange to have blood pressure checked every 12 months and have a Cervical Screening Test every five years. Remember to check your breasts for lumps every month yourself.

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