



Progesterone Only Pills (the “mini-pill”)

What is it, and how does it work?

The progesterone-only pill differs from combined oral contraceptives in that it contains only one hormone, called progesterone. (The combined pill contains both estrogen and progesterone.)

There are many ways in which progesterone-only pills work:

- they thicken cervical mucus;
- hinder ovulation (the release of an egg) or fertilization; and
- change the lining of the fallopian tubes and uterus.

To be most effective, these pills must be taken every day at the same time. There are no ‘sugar pills’ or ‘placebos’ to take, and there are no days you don’t take pills. As with other progesterone-only methods, irregular bleeding is common.

How effective is it?

Effectiveness is measured in two ways. Theoretical effectiveness or ‘perfect use’ is a measure of how well a birth control method works when used perfectly. ‘Actual effectiveness’ is a measure of how well a method works during actual use—that is, when it takes into account human error. About 3 women in 100 using the progesterone-only pill perfectly for one year will get pregnant. In actual use, 5 to 10 women in 100 using them will get pregnant in a year.

Could I have problems taking it?

You could have irregular bleeding, and you risk pregnancy if you take your pill three hours late or more and have intercourse during this time.

How do I use it?

Each pill package contains 28 pills. Every pill contains hormones; there are no ‘sugar’ pills. POPs must be taken daily without interruption to be effective, because the small amount of progestin in them is used rapidly in the body. Little or none of it remains in the body after 24 hours.

It’s essential to take your pill at the same time every day. Late afternoon or early evening is best. You can start POPs at any time during your cycle. If you start on the first day of your period, you don’t need a back-up contraceptive method. If you start later, use a back-up method for 48 hours afterward.

When you first start POPs, as your body gets used to them, you could have minor side-effects like ‘breakthrough’ bleeding and headaches. They’re not dangerous and usually go away in the first two months. If you have symptoms that persist longer, or seem severe, call or return to the clinic for a re-evaluation. About half the women

who take POPs have irregular bleeding. This side-effect can’t be corrected by a change in pill dosage.

What do I do if I miss a pill?

If you miss a pill by 3 hours or more, take it as soon as you remember, and for the next 48 hours use a back-up method like condoms, or don’t have intercourse. Continue taking your pills, the next at the regular time, even if that means taking 2 pills in one day.

Use a back-up method for 48 hours after any episode of heavy vomiting or diarrhea, because illness may cause you to absorb too little of your pill to be effective.

If you have unprotected sex after missing a pill by 3 or more hours, you can get emergency contraception, provided you do so within 120 hours (5 days) for best results (but, it may be considered for up to 7 days). Continue taking your pills, but talk to your clinician as soon as possible. Consider having a pregnancy test two to four weeks after taking ECP just to be certain you aren’t pregnant.

If you accidentally become pregnant while using POPs, your fetus won’t be harmed by the small amount of progestin in the pills. However, as with any other medication, discontinue use as soon as you know you’re pregnant.

What do I do if I miss a period?

If you don’t get a period within 45 days of your last one, call the clinic for a pregnancy test. Continue your pills until your appointment. Because many women on POPs have irregular periods, you may want to check frequently to make sure you aren’t pregnant.

What happens if I stop taking POPs?

First, complete the package you are taking. Your first period may be irregular or it may be late. It’s possible to get pregnant soon after discontinuing POPs. If you don’t want to be, use another birth control method.

What else should I know?

Always tell your doctor if you’re using the progesterone-only pill. Some medications, like those for seizures and tuberculosis, as well as diarrhea and vomiting, can lower the effectiveness of the pill so that you could become pregnant even if you don’t miss any pills.

While on these medications or when you’re sick, use another method of birth control like foam and condoms along with your pills, or you may need to discontinue them temporarily for another method.

If you have an emergency when the clinic is not open, call your doctor or go to the local hospital emergency room. If you have any questions or problems, call the office.