***Information about Birth Control Pills (Oral Contraceptives)***

**Birth control pills can be used for many reasons:**

-birth control (up to 99% effective if taken correctly)

-control of heavy, painful or irregular periods

-control of premenstrual (PMS) symptoms

-control of acne

**How Does the Pill Work?**

The hormones in the pill (estrogen and progesterone) will replace the estrogen and progesterone that your body makes naturally. This stops the hormonal signals that trigger ovulation. The cervical mucus thickens to stop sperm. The pill’s hormones also keep the uterine lining thin, so that your periods will be lighter and less painful. The pill also decreases the amount of freely-circulating testosterone in your bloodstream, which decreases acne.

In most pill packs, there are 21 “active” pills followed by 7 “placebo” pills. The active and placebo pills will have different colors. Placebo pills have no hormones. Your period will start sometime during the placebo week. Some pill packs only have 21 pills, so if your pills are in a 21-day pack, you need to remember to start the next pack 7 days after you take your last pill.

Most pills are either “monophasic” or “triphasic.” Monophasic pills have the same dose in each active pill. Triphasic pills usually have a slightly different dose during each week of active pills.

**How to start the pill:**

-start on the first day (in the first 24 hours) of your period or the Sunday after your period starts and take one pill every day

-take your pill at about the same time every day

-take the pills in the order they appear in your pill pack

-use condoms for the first month you are on the pill

**What if I Want to Skip My Period?**

If you don’t want to have your period and are taking a “monophasic” pill, you can skip your placebo pills and go straight to your next pill pack, so that you only take active pills. There is no limit on how many times you can skip your period. You may have some breakthrough bleeding the first time you try this. Do not try this with “triphasic” pills. Most triphasic pills have the letters “Tri-” in the name but not all of them do, so ask your doctor if you’re not sure.

**What Do I Do if I Miss a Pill?**

-if you miss one active pill, take it as soon as you remember, and still take the next pill at its usual time. This may mean you end up taking two pills on the same day.

-if you miss two active pills (in a row), take two pills on the day you remember and two pills on the next day. You need to use condoms for the first 7 days after restarting your pill.

-if you miss three active pills, throw out the rest of that pack and start a new pack when it’s been 7 days since you last took a pill. You need to use condoms until you’ve been back on the pill for a month.

-if you miss a placebo pill, this is OK, just make sure you start your next pill pack on time.

**What else should I know?**

-the same pill can have multiple different generic names, so don’t worry if the pill you are given at the pharmacy has a different name than what your doctor mentioned. It will still be the same pill.

-most mild side effects (see below) will resolve within 2-3 months of starting the pill, but if they don’t go away, talk to your doctor about trying a different pill.

-if you don’t get your period during or right after your placebo week, take a home pregnancy test. If it’s negative, then it’s just a side effect from the pill.

-the pill does not protect against STDs. Only latex and polyurethane condoms protect against STDs.

-the pill does not affect your future fertility.

**When Should I See My Doctor Again?**

Come to clinic 2-3 months after you start the pills for a check-up and blood pressure reading. If you have bothersome side effects, call us to see if you need to be seen sooner.

**Possible side effects include:**

-irregular bleeding (especially during the first 3-6 months or if you miss any pills)

-very light or no period (this can happen with very low-dose pills and it’s not dangerous)

-breast tenderness or increased breast size

-water retention, feeling bloated or rarely weight gain

-changes in your appetite, mood, or sex drive

-headache or nausea

-blotchiness in your skin (rare)

**Possible rare serious side effects include:**

-high blood pressure

-blood clots in the deep veins of your legs, or in your lungs (smokers are at increased risk for this life-threatening problem)

**Do not take birth control pills if you have any of the following:**

-migraine headaches with aura

-uncontrolled high blood pressure or high cholesterol or lupus

-if you smoke and are over the age of 35

-if you have a genetic disorder that increases your risk of blood clots

-heart disease or liver disease, severe diabetes, heart attack, stroke, or breast cancer

-epilepsy and take medications (the pill might be OK, but ask your neurologist first)

**When should I call 911? What are signs of a serious emergency?**

-lots of pain, swelling or redness in just one leg (it could be a life-threatening blood clot)

-chest pain or shortness of breath

-extreme severe headache

*Please call us at (312) 440-9400 if you have any questions.*

*Northwestern Women’s Health Associates*

*680 N. Lake Shore Drive Suite #1200*

*Chicago, IL 60611*