

# COMBINED PILL GUIDELINES

## How do I take the combined pill?

There are different types of pills and many different brands. They're taken differently.

The combined pill is designed to give you a withdrawal bleed once a month. A withdrawal bleed isn't the same as your period. It's caused by you not taking hormones during a pill-free break or on placebo (sugar) pill days.

Most instructions tell you to take a seven-day pill-free break but you can choose to shorten this break, or to miss it and not have a withdrawal bleed. This is usually outside the manufacturers licence but is fully supported by the UK FSRH.

Missing or shortening the break could help you if you get heavy or painful bleeding, headaches, or mood swings on pill-free days.

When you miss taking a pill just before or just after a pill-free break, you're more at risk of pregnancy. So taking a shorter break or missing the break might make it less risky that you'll get pregnant if you forget to take a pill at another time.

## Monophasic pills

This is the most common type of pill. There are 21 identical pills in a pack and each pill has the same amount of hormone. You can take the monophasic pill in the following ways.

1. **Standard Way.** One pill a day for 21 days then no pills for the next 4 or 7 days (21/4 or 21/7). You'll usually have a withdrawal bleed during the pill-free break. Start taking the pill again on the fifth or eighth day even if you're still bleeding.
2. **Extended use or tricycling.** One pill a day for nine weeks (three packs of pills) then no pills for the next 4 or 7 days (63/4 or 63/7). You'll usually have a withdrawal bleed during the pill-free break. Start taking the pill again on the fifth or eighth day even if you're still bleeding.
3. **Continuous pill-taking.** One pill a day every day with no break. You won't have a withdrawal bleed but you may still get some bleeding, which may be occasional or more frequent. Any bleeding you get is likely to reduce over time if you keep taking the pill continuously.
4. **Flexible extended use.** One pill a day every day for at least 21 days. If you get bleeding that's unacceptable to you for 3-4 days, then stop taking your pills for 4 days. Start taking the pill again on the fifth day, even if you're still bleeding. This can help manage the bleeding. Restart with the pill marked with the correct day of the week and take at least 21 pills before taking your next break.

You can take the pill continuously without a break for as long as you like, as long as your doctor, nurse or online provider doesn't advise you to stop.

## Can I miss out my withdrawal bleed?

Yes. This isn't harmful. There are no known benefits to withdrawal bleeds and no known risks to missing them.

If you're taking a monophasic 21-day or EveryDay monophasic pill (where all the active pills are identical), there's no need to have a withdrawal bleed at all, unless you want one.

Sometimes you do still get some bleeding. This is nothing to worry about. If you've taken your pills correctly, you'll still be protected from pregnancy.

For any type of phasic pill ask your doctor or nurse for advice on missing one or more withdrawal bleeds.

## What should I do if I forget to take a pill or start my pack late?

Missing pills or starting a pack late can make the pill less effective. The chance of pregnancy after missing pills depends on:

- when pills are missed
- how many pills are missed
- the way you take the pill.

*This leaflet is adapted from the fpa guide to the Combined Pill 2019.*

*For more information on sexual health visit [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk) or [www.sexwise.org.uk](http://www.sexwise.org.uk)*

*Information for young people can be found at [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)*

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Missing one pill anywhere in a pack isn't a problem. You'll still be protected from pregnancy. Missing two or more pills or starting a new pack late might affect your contraceptive cover.

## What should I do if I'm sick or have diarrhoea?

If you vomit within three hours of taking a pill, it won't have been absorbed by your body, so it's as if you hadn't taken it. You'll still be protected from pregnancy as long as no more pills are missed. See When did you take your last pill? If you continue to be sick, seek advice.

If you have very severe diarrhoea that continues for more than 24 hours, this may make the pill less effective. Keep taking your pill at the normal time, but treat each day that you have severe diarrhoea as if you'd missed a pill and follow the 'When did you take your last pill' guidance

## When did you take your last pill?

- Up to **48 hours** (less than 2 days) since your last pill- Take your next pill now. Continue taking the rest of the pack as usual. This might mean that you need to take two pills on one day
- **48-72 hours** (2-3 days) since your last pill- You've missed one pill. Take the last pill you missed now. Continue taking the rest of the pack as usual.

If you're in the first week after a pill-free break, emergency contraception isn't usually needed unless you started the pack more than 24 hours late, already missed a pill this week OR missed a pill in the seven days before the pill-free break.

If you're in any other week, emergency contraception isn't usually needed, unless you've missed another pill in the past seven days.

- **More than 72 hours** (more than 3 days) since your last pill- You've missed two or more pills. Take the last pill you missed now. Continue taking the rest of the pack as usual. Leave any earlier missed pills. Continue taking the rest of the pack as usual. Use additional contraception or avoid sex for the next seven days.

If you're in the first week after a pill-free break and you've had unprotected sex during the pill-free break or during week one, you may need emergency contraception. Seek advice.

If you're in any other week, emergency contraception isn't usually needed, unless you've missed another pill in the past seven days.

If you're due to start a pill-free break within the next seven days, don't take the break.

## Did you start the pack more than 24 hours late after a seven day pill-free break OR more than 96 hours (4 days) late after a four day pill-free break? Have you had a gap of 8 days or more?

Start the pack as soon as you remember. Continue as usual. Use additional contraception or avoid sex for the next seven days. You might need emergency contraception if you've had unprotected sex during the pill-free break. Speak to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist as soon as possible.

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For more information on sexual health visit [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk) or [www.sexwise.org.uk](http://www.sexwise.org.uk)  
Information for young people can be found at [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)*