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Getting Smart about the Pill

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Originally Published: Apr 25, 2004

Revised: Apr 25, 2007

Many of my female friends say they're scared to use birth control pills (the Pill). They hear myths like "the Pill causes breast cancer" and decide to risk unplanned pregnancy rather than use this 95- to 99-percent effective method of birth control. Like many other teens, they just aren't educated enough about the Pill.

I was determined to change this. So, I compiled a list of teens' top questions about the Pill and set out to answer them with the help of Laura Castleman, M.D., M.P.H. A gynecologist for the past nine years, Dr. Castleman runs the Women's Sexual Health Center at the Castleman Medical Group, in Troy, MI, and sees many teen patients.

Sex, Etc.: Does the Pill make you gain weight?

Dr. Castleman: No, it does not. Multiple studies show no significant weight gain. The whole idea of women gaining weight on the Pill became common in the 1960's—when the dose of hormones used in the Pill was much higher than today. Today's low-dose pills make it very unlikely for a girl to experience any weight gain.

Sex, Etc.: Does the Pill increase the risk of ovarian and breast cancer?

Dr. Castleman: No, it does not. The Pill actually decreases the risk of ovarian cancer, the longer a woman is on it. If she takes the Pill for four years or less, it decreases the risk by 30 percent; if she takes it for 12 years or more, she decreases the risk by 80 percent. According to current research, the Pill does not seem to increase the risk of breast cancer—even if a woman started taking the Pill at a young age and if her family has a history of breast cancer.

Sex, Etc.: If a girl is on the Pill, will she have trouble having kids later on?

Dr. Castleman: No, the Pill doesn't have any long-term effects on a woman's fertility, since it's out of her body 24 hours after she stops taking it. Some girls think they have to take a "break" if they're on the Pill for a while, but this is absolutely not necessary. Even if a woman is on the Pill for decades, it's out of her system within 24 hours, so she's fertile after that 24-hour period.

Sex, Etc.: Does a girl need her parent's permission to get the Pill?

Dr. Castleman: A girl doesn't need her parent's permission, no matter what state she lives in. But if she's concerned about confidentiality—whether or not a doctor or health care provider will tell her parents that she's on the Pill—it depends on where she gets her prescription. If she goes to a public health clinic, her confidentiality is protected. But if she goes to a private doctor, it depends on that doctor's confidentiality policy. A teen should always call first to find out about a clinic's or doctor's policy.

PILL FACTS

What is the Pill? The birth control pill (a.k.a., "the Pill") is an oral contraceptive made of synthetic hormones that a female takes once a day to prevent pregnancy.

How does it work? The Pill stops the ovaries from releasing an egg (ovulation); it also thickens the cervical mucus, which stops sperm from joining an egg. The Pill also prevents a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus and starting a pregnancy.

What are the pros? The Pill can make your period more regular and less painful, reduce acne, and lower the risk of ovarian or uterine cancer.

What are the cons? You have to remember to take it once a day. The Pill does not protect you from sexually transmitted infections. (You need to use a latex or polyurethane condom plus the Pill.)

How can you get the Pill? You need a prescription. You can get one at a private doctor or a public health clinic. To find a clinic, check the yellow pages under "clinics" or "family planning."

How much does it cost? A 28-day pack of pills costs between \$20 and \$35, and you'll also have to pay for a doctor or clinic visit, which can range from \$35-\$125. But you can pay what you can afford at clinics that offer sliding-scale fees. Call the clinic first and ask if they have reduced-fee services.