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The birth control pill is a drug consisting of artificial hormones which is taken by mouth to prevent or to end a pregnancy. It was first marketed in the United States in 1960. There are two types of birth control pills: the combination estrogen and progesterone pill and the progestin-only pill or "mini-pill."

# *The Pill*

The oral method  
of  
birth control

by Joan Appleton, RN

## How It Works

\* Attempts to block an egg from being released from the ovary (ovulation); therefore conception cannot occur.

1) The combined pill (estrogen and progesterone) fails to prevent release of an egg in 4.7% of monthly cycles.

2) The mini-pill (progestin only) rarely, if ever, prevents an egg from being released from an ovary.

\* Thickens a woman's vaginal secretions making it difficult for sperm to travel up the reproductive tract.

\* Makes the lining of the uterus (womb) "slippery" so that a fertilized egg cannot attach itself and therefore dies. Thus, birth control pills can cause early abortions.

\* Slows down the journey of a fertilized egg through the fallopian tube so that by the time it reaches the womb it is too old and literally dries up and dies.

## Minor Side Effects

- \* Nausea/Vomiting
- \* Breast tenderness
- \* Weight gain/Fluid retention
- \* Headache
- \* Depression
- \* Spotting or bleeding between periods
- \* Missed menstrual periods

These risks are dose related and may or may not cease after three months or after an adjustment in the pill hormone level is made.

## Major Side Effects

- \* High blood pressure
- \* Blood clots (which can cause heart attacks or strokes)
- \* Cancer risks:
  - cervical
  - ovarian
  - breast
  - skin
  - liver
- \* Benign tumors:
  - cervical
  - ovarian
  - breast
  - liver
- \* Gallbladder disease
- \* Impaired vision

Women who have a history of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol level, heavy smoking, excessive weight and depression are at a higher risk of all these side effects.