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### **INFORMATION FOR ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE USERS**

Oral contraceptives (OCs) are also known as “birth control pills”, or just the “The Pill”. They may be prescribed for health reasons, such as acne, ovarian cysts, severe cramps, irregular or very heavy periods, or most commonly, for the prevention of pregnancy. When taken correctly they are easy, safe, and effective to use. For full information on OCs you should read this handout as well as the printed insert from the manufacturer included with each packet of pills.

#### **GETTING STARTED**

- You can start the pill any time in your menstrual cycle if you are sure you are not pregnant.
- If you start the pill on the first day of your period, you will be protected from pregnancy immediately.
- You can also start the pill up to, and including, the fifth day of your period and you will be protected from pregnancy immediately.
- If you start the pill at any other time in your menstrual cycle, you will need to use additional contraception, such as condoms, for the first 7 days of pill taking.

After you have begun your pills, continue taking one pill a day at approximately the **same time** each day, about every 24 hours. You may choose the time most convenient for you. Many women remember to take their pills by linking pill-taking with some other regular activity, such as brushing their teeth in the morning or taking a vitamin. Cell phone alarms/reminders can be helpful.

Take one pill a day **until you finish the pack**. Then:

**\*If you are using a 28-day pack**, begin a new pack immediately and skip no days between packages.

**\*If you are using a 21-day pack**, stop taking pills for one week and then start your new pack.

In both packs the first 21 pills are the active hormone pills. In the 28-day pack the last 7 pills are non-hormonal pills. Some packs/types of pills have smaller amounts of active hormones Days 22-28 depending on the specific pill and you should take these. The purpose is to keep you taking a pill every day so you do not make a mistake. It is expected that you will get your period during the week of inactive pills (or the week “off” pills). For most women, their flow begins about 1-3 days after taking the last hormonal pill.

During the first few months on OCs, you may experience what is called “break-through bleeding” which is bleeding that occurs when taking the active hormone pills. Although inconvenient, you do not need to be worried if you have taken your pills correctly. The problem usually resolves as your body adjusts to the pills within three months.

#### **BACK-UP BIRTH CONTROL**

As a rule, as long as you remember to take your pills the same time each day, you should have effective birth control even during the week of “off” pills. The pill may be less effective in certain situations. At these times, you should use a back-up method like condoms for contraception:

- **During the first month you are taking OCPs.**
- **If you have severe nausea with vomiting, or if you have diarrhea. Use back-up method until your next period.**
- **If you are taking certain prescription medications (See “Interactions with other Medications”)**
- **If you forget to take your pills on time (see “Missed Pills.”)**

- **If you run out of pills or decide to discontinue pills**
- **If you experience any of the warning symptoms and discontinue your pills until you have been checked (see “Warnings” below).**

### **POTENTIAL ISSUES WITH OCs**

The most commonly experienced negative side effects from the pills include mild nausea, breast tenderness, slight weight gain or fluid retention, increased acne, moodiness, irregular spotting or bleeding. Fortunately these annoying symptoms usually will diminish or completely resolve within the first three packs of pills as the body adjusts to the new hormone levels.

**If you have bleeding between OC’s**, try to take your pills at the same time every day. If you have spotting (light bleeding between periods) for several cycles, call the doctor’s office for advice.

Although the final word is not in on the effect of OCs on breast cancer, most of the research suggests that the majority of women are not at increased risk of developing breast cancer. Occasionally, OCPs may have a negative impact on cholesterol or blood pressure. For some, these effects may be controlled by diet and exercise. If they persist, OCs may need to be discontinued.

### **MISSED PILLS**

If you forget to take a pill or start a pack late

- Missing pills or starting the pack late may make your pill less effective. The chance of pregnancy after missing pills depends on when pills are missed and how many pills are missed. A pill is late when you have forgotten to take it at the usual time. A pill has been missed when it is more than 24 hours since the time you should have taken it.