

Menstrual Suppression with Birth Control Pills

Taking an active, hormone containing, birth-control pill every day helps to stop all menstrual bleeding, after an initial period of irregular bleeding. This handout explains how.

How does it work?

It's all about hormones, chemicals that tell your uterus and ovaries what to do. The hormones in birth control pills are like the hormones your body makes naturally, only in different amounts.

What do birth control pills do to the uterus?

Most birth control pill packs have two kinds of pills: active hormone pills and "spacer" pills without any hormone. The active hormone pills prevent bleeding. You would only bleed while taking the "spacer" pills.

Over time, birth control pills shrink the lining of the uterus. The lining gets so thin, there's not much to bleed.

Why do the spacer pills cause bleeding?

The "spacer" pills contain no hormones. You bleed when you take them, because your hormone levels drop. If you have constant level of hormones, eventually you won't bleed.

Irregular spotting and bleeding is common in the first 6 months. Why?

Your body is getting used to the constant level of hormones. If you have bleeding or spotting, you do NOT need to stop the pill. Instead, try to figure out what caused the bleeding. Keep taking the hormone pill every day, if you want to have no bleeding.

How can you help prevent bleeding/spotting?

Take your pill as close as possible to the same time every day. Hormones wear off if you take your pill late.

Other tips for bleeding and spotting:

* Medications, like antibiotics and herbal drugs, can change the amount of the pill hormones in your system. You may have spotting with a new medication or a change in dose. Alcohol can be the same way - bingeing can cause spotting later on. Try to take your pill at a time of day when you aren't taking any other medications.

* Time of day, and stress, can change your hormone levels. If you have a lot of spotting, try switching the time you take your pill - from morning to bedtime, or vice-versa. It can take 2 weeks for your body to get used to the new time. If you are under a lot of stress, this can also cause spotting. It usually goes away after the stress goes away.

* Vomiting or diarrhea: Not keeping the pill down, or having it go through your system too fast, can make it not work as well, so you get spotting.

* Altitude: Some women have spotting when they take airplane trips or climb mountains. It could be the change in air pressure, going to a new time zone, or even a change in your sleep patterns. Try to take your pill at the time you would in your home time zone.

* Some pain medicines, like Aspirin, Ibuprofen, or Naprosyn (but NOT Tylenol), can decrease spotting. Take them as directed on the label, when you are bleeding/spotting. Stop using them when the spotting stops. Don't use more than one kind at a time to avoid overdosing. Don't use them longer than 1-2 weeks, or they could hurt your liver and kidneys.

* Vitamin C, 1000 mg a day, taken with your pill, can help increase hormone levels. Stop taking this high dose of Vitamin C after one week. If you take it for too long, your body gets used to that large amount of Vitamin C, and then you start spotting again when you stop taking it.

* Grapefruit juice contains a chemical that increases hormone levels. If you take your pill with a glass of grapefruit juice, it might help to reduce the spotting.

If you have any questions about any of these suggestions, please call your clinic.

Your doctor may need to do an exam to find out why you are bleeding, because there may be an infection or change in health that is causing the bleeding. If you stop taking the pill, tell your doctor.

Updated March 2008 Leigh Saint-Louis MD