

An alternative way to take your combined oral contraceptive (COC)

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What does the drug do?

The combined pill works by blocking the normal female cycle. This stops the ovaries releasing an egg each month (ovulation).

It takes 7 days of pill-taking to switch the ovaries off, but it takes only 8 days of no pill-taking for the ovaries to start ovulating again.

The usual and licensed way to take the COC is to take a pill every day for 21 days and then to have a break for 7 days.

This means that some women are very near the point of ovulating at the end of their break each month, particularly if they extend their break by missing pills at the end or beginning of the packet.

During the “pill free break” a bleed occurs but this is not a proper period and only happens because the pill taking has been stopped.

You may prefer to consider taking the COC differently. Alternative regimes may be more effective and will reduce the number of withdrawal bleeds you have. These regimes are not currently licensed but are supported by the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive healthcare.

They will not increase the chance of side-effects.

Alternative ways of taking the pill include:

1. Run together packets of the COC.
For example, take 3 packets of pills (3 x 21) in a row and then have a 4 day break.
You may wish to run together more packets if this suits you.

Or

2. Take the COC continuously until you start to bleed. If this bleeding continues for 3 days in a row, it is a sign that your body needs to bleed and you should then stop the pill for 4 days.
You must have at least 3 weeks of pill-taking between each break.

These regimes can be flexible and will allow you to control when you do have a bleed.

The golden rule is this:

“You must never have more than one break per month and that break should never be more than 7 days long. Fewer breaks and shorter breaks are fine”.

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