



The Birth Control Pill as an Acne Treatment

Women taking oral contraceptives may experience a positive side effect of the birth control pill — it also serves as an acne treatment. Find out how the birth control pill can help you manage acne.

By Diana Rodriguez

Medically reviewed by Pat F. Bass III, MD, MPH

Women who are already taking birth control pills may notice a side effect that they enjoy — clear, smooth skin. “Oral contraceptive pills work well for mitigating acne,” says Amy Derick, MD, a board-certified dermatologist in Barrington, Ill.

While the connection between birth control pills and acne may not be obvious, changes in hormone levels in women can often trigger acne outbreaks. These changes — during puberty, pregnancy, menstruation, or menopause — affect oil glands in the skin. When these glands produce excess oil, called sebum, it can clog the pores and lead to unsightly pimples and blemishes. “Hormonal acne usually manifests as deeper bumps around the mouth and jaw line,” explains Dr. Derick.

The birth control pill contains hormones, which, in addition to preventing pregnancy, work to slow excess sebum production by the skin's glands. With less oil to clog the pores, skin becomes clearer and acne can improve.

However, oral contraceptives are rarely prescribed as a sole acne treatment — they often work best when used in conjunction with topical acne treatments like retinoids and benzoyl peroxide, or an oral antibiotic. A dermatologist typically won't prescribe an oral contraceptive to manage acne until these topical treatments have been tried and failed.

Which Birth Control Pills Work Best to Prevent Acne?

There are three types of oral contraceptives approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of acne in women who don't have health risks that would prevent them from taking an oral contraceptive. They are:

Estrostep (norethindrone acetate and ethinyl estradiol). Estrostep also increases SHBG and decreases testosterone. It's indicated for the treatment of acne in women at least 15 years of age or older who have started menstruating, whose acne cannot be controlled with topical acne treatment, and who want to take an oral contraceptive for birth control. It's also recommended that the woman plan to use the oral contraceptive for a minimum of six

months.

Ortho Tri-Cyclen (norgestimate and ethinyl estradiol). Ortho Tri-Cyclen affects hormones in the same way as the other two contraceptives. Studies have shown that it can be an effective treatment for acne vulgaris. It is indicated for the same women and reasons as Estrostep.

YAZ (drospirenone and ethinyl estradiol). This combination oral contraceptive increases levels of sex hormone binding globulin, or SHBG, and decreases testosterone levels. YAZ is effective on moderate acne and is indicated as an acne treatment for women age 14 and older who have started menstruating, but only for those who want to use an oral contraceptive for birth control. A note of caution: The FDA issued a letter or warning to the makers of Yaz in September 2009, so be sure to speak to your doctor and pharmacist about potential risks associated with this drug.

What You Need To Know About Taking Birth Control Pills

Women who take an oral contraceptive as acne treatment must meet the FDA's requirements; there are some women who *shouldn't* take an oral contraceptive because of an increased risk of side effects. These include women who:

- Smoke
- Have high blood pressure
- Are older than 35
- Have migraine headaches

Oral contraceptives can produce minor side effects, like:

- Constipation or diarrhea
- Vomiting or nausea
- Bloating or abdominal cramping
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in menstruation
- Soreness or swelling of the breasts

More serious side effects of oral contraceptives may include:

- Feeling weak or numb in a limb
- Difficulty breathing

Vision loss or double vision

Feeling faint or dizzy

Heavy menstrual periods

Fatigue

Skin rash

Increased risk of blood clots, heart attack, stroke, or breast or liver tumors

Only you and your doctor can determine if oral contraceptives are the right choice to help control your acne.



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