



ORAL PILLS

Oral contraceptive pills have been in use in India for a long time. These are available from pharmacies and health facilities under different brand names such as Mala-D, Mala-N, Ovral, Ovral-L, Choice, Primovlar. These contraceptive pills are to be taken by women orally. Mala-D and Mala-N (Mala-N is distributed free of cost while Mala-D is distributed against a small cost) are the most commonly available and used brands of contraceptive pills in India. Therefore, let us understand about them in detail.



The contraceptive pill is an easy and safe method that can be used by young women to delay the first pregnancy and to increase the interval between pregnancies.

Mala pills are designed to be taken every day. Each strip of Mala contains 28 pills arranged in four rows. The first three rows contain 21 white pills, while the last row has seven red or black pills. The white tablets are contraceptive pills containing hormones. The remaining seven red/black pills are iron pills.

How does it work

Contraceptive pills contain two hormones, namely estrogen and progesterone.

Estrogen

The hormone estrogen prevents the egg from maturing in the ovary. Since there is no egg for the sperm to fertilize, pregnancy cannot occur.

Progesterone

The hormone progesterone makes the cervical mucus very thick. This makes it difficult for the sperms to enter the uterus.

In addition, progesterone prevents the development of the inner lining of the uterus, which usually happens each month in preparation to receive the fertilized egg. Thus, even if fertilization does happen, the fertilized egg cannot implant into the uterus. This prevents pregnancy.

Who can use oral contraceptive pills

Oral contraceptive pills are a suitable method for women who wish to delay their first pregnancy or to give adequate space between two pregnancies. If one wishes to use oral pills for more than 3-4 years, it would be advisable to seek medical opinion.

Who cannot use oral contraceptive pills

- Women who are breastfeeding
- Women who are unsure if they are pregnant
- Women with unexplained irregular bleeding
- Women with high blood pressure, diabetes mellitus, jaundice
- Women with liver disorders
- Women who have ever had breast cancer
- Women who have had a stroke or blood clots in the legs, lungs or brain
- Women who are on medication for epilepsy or tuberculosis

Tests to be performed before starting to use oral contraceptive pills

No routine tests are necessary before starting oral pills. If the woman is unsure about whether she is pregnant or not, a pregnancy test may be needed before starting to use pills. A blood pressure measurement is advisable before starting pills. However, if it is not immediately possible, one can start the pills and get the blood pressure measured later.

How to use

- Start the pills on any day within the first five days of the start of a period. Start with the first white pill in the packet, preferably at bed time after dinner.
- After this, take one white pill every day, preferably at the same time.
- Once the 21 white pills have been taken, continue with the seven red/black iron pills, one each day. The menstrual period usually occurs while taking these iron pills. Do not stop the pills, continue taking them.
- Once the seven iron pills have been taken, start with the first white pill in a new packet the next day, without any gap in between.
- In case one forgets to take a pill on a particular day, the missed pill should be taken whenever one remembers about it the next day. The next pill meant for that day should then be taken at the regular time. This may mean taking two pills on the same day.
- If one forgets to take the pill for three consecutive days, then the method is ineffective during that cycle. This means that pregnancy can occur. Stop taking the pills, discard the remaining pills, and restart with a new packet on the first day of the next menstrual period. Till this time, an alternative contraceptive method, e.g. condom needs to be used.
- If pills are not taken regularly and a period is missed, then seek medical attention immediately as this could be a pregnancy.

Adverse effects

Many women experience adverse effects when using oral contraceptive pills. These are usually minor and disappear within a few days. However, rarely, there may be serious adverse effects needing immediate medical attention. Some of these are described below.

1. Irregular bleeding, giddiness and nausea

These are common side effects that occur in the initial few days/months of starting oral pills and usually disappear within three months of use. If they persist beyond this time, it is advisable to seek medical attention.

2. Mood changes including feeling low

Different types of oral pills contain different combinations of estrogen and progestogen. Studies show that pills with higher levels of progestogen may result in mood changes including feeling low or depressed. If this occurs, it may be useful to switch to a brand with a lower dosage of progestogen.

3. Migraine

Some women experience migraine headaches when using oral pills. If this occurs, it is best to seek medical attention.

4. Serious adverse effects

Rarely, women using oral pills may develop blood clots in the legs, lungs or the brain. This is a serious event and needs immediate medical attention as it could be life threatening. Some studies indicate that there can be increased risk of breast cancer with prolonged use of oral pills, however the studies are not conclusive. On the other hand, prolonged use of oral pills is known to protect against ovarian and cervical cancer.

Caution: *It is improper to tell the patient not to expect any side effect. Because if she does get them, she feels betrayed by the medical team. It is better to tell them about possible side-effects but to expect them rarely!*



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