Contraceptives: The combined oral contraceptive pill is often just called "the pill". It contains artificial versions of female hormones oestrogen and progesterone, which are produced naturally in the ovaries. If sperm reaches an egg (ovum), pregnancy can happen. Contraception tries to stop this happening usually by keeping the egg and sperm apart or by stopping the release of an egg (ovulation).

How it prevents pregnancy

The pill prevents the ovaries from releasing an egg each month (ovulation). It also:

1. thickens the mucus in the neck of the womb, so it is harder for sperm to penetrate the womb and reach an egg
2. thins the lining of the womb, so there is less chance of a fertilised egg implanting into the womb and being able to grow
3. The pill is over 99% effective if used correctly. Other methods of contraception are better at preventing pregnancy, such as the IUD, IUS, implant and injection

Advantages and disadvantages

Some advantages of the pill include:

1. it does not interrupt sex
2. it usually makes your bleeds regular, lighter and less painful
3. it reduces your risk of cancer of the ovaries, womb and colon
4. it can reduce symptoms of PMS (premenstrual syndrome(
5. it can sometimes reduce acne
6. it may protect against pelvic inflammatory disease
7. it may reduce the risk of fibroids, ovarian cysts and non-cancerous breast disease

Some disadvantages of the pill include:

1. it can cause temporary side effects at first, such as headaches, nausea, breast tenderness and mood swings – if these do not go after a few months, it may help to change to a different pill
2. it can increase your blood pressure
3. it does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections
4. breakthrough bleeding and spotting is common in the first few months of using the pill
5. it has been linked to an increased risk of some serious health conditions, such as blood clots and breast cancer