

How birth control pills work

The oral contraceptive, commonly called “the pill,” typically contains two hormones, estrogen and progestin.

It primarily works by stopping women’s ovaries from releasing eggs. The hormones in the pill inhibit the release of pituitary hormones that stimulate ovulation, said Dr. Barbara Lukert, an endocrinologist and United Methodist in Kansas City, Kan. The pill also works by making it harder for sperm to reach an egg, she added.

Pregnancy cannot happen unless an egg can join with a sperm.

“Some people get the idea that it causes abortions of an already developed fetus,” Lukert said. “That’s not what happens.”

The morning-after pill used for emergency contraception works differently from the traditional pill. The morning-after pill, such as Ella and Plan B, contains a very large dose of a progestin-like agent that stops a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus, Lukert said.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports that if taken daily as prescribed, the traditional birth-control pill is 91 to 99 percent effective in preventing pregnancy.

Physicians also prescribe the oral contraceptive for medical conditions unrelated to controlling pregnancy. [Research compiled by the nonprofit Guttmacher Institute](#), which promotes reproductive health, found that 14 percent of U.S. pill users — 1.5 million women — did so for exclusively noncontraceptive reasons. The study also found that 762,000 U.S. women who use the pill have never had sex.