CONDITION

Birth control pill overdose

Learn what can happen after taking too many birth control pills, which symptoms to watch for, when to contact Poison Help, and when emergency care is needed.

WHAT IT IS
Overdose from taking too many oral contraceptive pills

BODY SYSTEM
Hormonal and reproductive

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Nausea, vomiting, dizziness, vaginal bleeding

WHAT CAUSES IT
Medication mistake or intentional ingestion

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Ingestion history and pill package review

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care and symptom management

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes, as the body clears hormones

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes, with collapse, seizure, breathing trouble, or unresponsiveness

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually good with serious complications uncommon

Overview

A birth control pill overdose means taking more oral contraceptive pills than directed. This may involve one extra pill, several pills, or an entire pill pack. It can happen accidentally, such as when someone forgets that they already took a dose. Young children may also swallow pills they find. Less often, a person may take many pills on purpose.

Most birth control pills contain estrogen and progestin or progestin alone. These hormones prevent pregnancy in several ways, including stopping ovulation and changing cervical mucus. Taking too many at one time can cause temporary side effects, but a single accidental extra dose is not usually expected to cause severe poisoning.

The amount and type of pill still matter. Some packs include inactive, or placebo, tablets that do not contain hormones. Certain placebo tablets contain iron, which can be harmful in a large

enough amount, especially to a small child. Other medicines or substances taken at the same time may also change the level of risk.

Do not wait for symptoms before seeking case-specific advice after a significant or uncertain ingestion. In the United States, contact Poison Help at 1-800-222-1222. A poison specialist can assess the exact product, amount, timing, age, body size, and symptoms. The specialist can often determine whether monitoring at home is reasonable or medical evaluation is needed.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the ingredients, number of pills, and person's health. They may begin within several hours, although vaginal bleeding can occur later.

Possible effects include:

A child who has not reached puberty may also have vaginal bleeding after swallowing hormone-containing pills. This can be upsetting to see, but it does not automatically mean that serious injury has occurred. The child should still be assessed through Poison Help or a healthcare professional.

Vomiting may lead to dehydration if it is frequent or the person cannot keep down fluids. Signs of dehydration include a dry mouth, reduced urination, unusual weakness, or dizziness when standing.

Call emergency services immediately if the person collapses, has a seizure, has trouble breathing, or cannot be awakened. Emergency care is also appropriate for severe confusion, repeated vomiting with marked weakness, or very heavy bleeding.

- Nausea, stomach discomfort, or vomiting
- Headache or dizziness
- Sleepiness or fatigue
- Breast tenderness
- Mood changes
- Vaginal spotting or bleeding, sometimes several days after the ingestion

Causes and risk factors

An overdose often results from a medication mistake. A person may take a second pill because they cannot remember taking the first one. Pills may also be confused with another medicine

or taken from the wrong day in the pack.

Children are at risk when pill packs are left in purses, drawers, or containers that are easy to open. A child's smaller body size can make the amount swallowed more important. The package should be kept available because its label and remaining pills can help identify the exposure.

Factors that affect risk include:

Taking several birth control pills intentionally requires prompt attention even if no physical symptoms are present. The person may need both poison assessment and support for emotional distress or possible self-harm.

Birth control pills should not be used to try to end an established pregnancy. Taking a large quantity is not a safe or reliable way to do so. A healthcare professional can provide confidential information about appropriate care.

- Whether the pills contain estrogen and progestin, progestin alone, or non-hormonal ingredients
- The number of active and inactive pills swallowed
- Whether inactive pills contain iron
- The person's age, body size, symptoms, and medical history
- Whether alcohol, prescription medicines, nonprescription medicines, or other substances were also taken
- Whether the amount or timing is uncertain

Diagnosis

There is no single test that confirms a birth control pill overdose. Assessment usually starts with the circumstances of the ingestion and the information on the package.

A poison specialist or healthcare professional may ask for:

Bring the pill pack or a clear photograph of its label to the emergency department or clinic if evaluation is advised. Do not delay urgent care while trying to count every tablet.

For an uncomplicated, isolated ingestion with mild or no symptoms, laboratory testing is often unnecessary. Testing may be considered if symptoms are significant, the product contains iron, another substance was taken, or the history is unclear. Depending on the situation, clinicians may check vital signs, hydration, blood counts, iron levels, or other laboratory results. A pregnancy test may be offered when it could affect ongoing contraceptive planning or

medical care.

- The exact product name and strength
- The ingredients listed on the package
- How many active and inactive tablets may be missing
- When the pills were taken
- The person's age and approximate weight
- Current symptoms and relevant medical conditions
- Any other medicines or substances involved

Treatment and management

There is no specific antidote that reverses birth control pill hormones. Management is based on symptoms and the ingredients involved.

Contact Poison Help promptly after a child swallows pills, after more than a small accidental extra dose, when the amount is unknown, or when the pack contains iron tablets. In the United States, 1-800-222-1222 connects callers to their regional poison center. People outside the United States should contact their local poison information service or urgent medical service.

Until advice is available:

A poison specialist may recommend observation at home when the exposure is expected to cause little or no toxicity. Monitoring may include watching for nausea, vomiting, unusual sleepiness, and later vaginal bleeding. Follow the specialist's instructions because recommendations depend on the exact product and circumstances.

If medical evaluation is needed, treatment is generally supportive. This means treating symptoms while the body clears the hormones. Care may include fluids for dehydration and medicine to control significant nausea. Activated charcoal is not routinely needed for minor birth control pill exposures. A clinician or poison specialist may consider it only in selected recent, potentially harmful ingestions.

If iron-containing tablets were swallowed, management may be different. Iron poisoning can initially cause vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, or gastrointestinal bleeding. Because early symptoms do not always show the full risk, a poison specialist may recommend blood tests and a period of observation.

An extra active pill may also leave too few pills to finish the current pack correctly. Do not guess about how to adjust the schedule. Contact the prescribing clinician or pharmacist with

the product name and the number of pills taken. Depending on the formulation and where the person is in the pack, backup contraception or emergency contraception may need to be discussed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides different missed-pill instructions for combined and progestin-only pills.

- Remove any remaining pills from the person's mouth.
- Keep the package and estimate how many pills are missing.
- Do not make the person vomit.
- Do not give activated charcoal, home remedies, or extra medicines unless a healthcare professional directs it.
- Do not give anything by mouth to someone who is very drowsy, having a seizure, or having trouble swallowing.

Complications

Serious medical complications from an isolated birth control pill overdose are uncommon. The more likely problems are short-term nausea, vomiting, breast tenderness, and unexpected vaginal bleeding.

Frequent vomiting can cause dehydration. Bleeding may also need medical assessment if it is heavy, lasts longer than expected, or causes weakness, shortness of breath, or lightheadedness.

Combined hormonal birth control has an ongoing association with blood clots during ordinary use. It is not clear that a one-time extra dose creates a predictable immediate clotting event. However, chest pain, sudden shortness of breath, coughing up blood, one-sided leg swelling, a sudden severe headache, weakness on one side, or new vision or speech changes always require urgent medical evaluation.

A large ingestion of iron-containing placebo tablets can cause serious iron poisoning. This concern is especially important for young children because risk depends partly on body size and the amount of elemental iron swallowed.

An intentional overdose may signal a mental health crisis. In the United States, call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Call 911 or the local emergency number if there is immediate danger, severe symptoms, or the person cannot be kept safe.

Follow up

After a minor exposure, a poison specialist may advise routine monitoring without an office visit. Nausea and breast tenderness should improve as the hormones leave the body. Spotting or vaginal bleeding may occur several days later.

Contact a healthcare professional for routine follow-up if symptoms do not improve, bleeding continues, or there are questions about restarting the pill. Follow-up is also important if vomiting may have prevented usual doses from being absorbed or if the current pack no longer contains enough active pills.

Ask a pharmacist or prescribing clinician how to continue the specific pill. Instructions vary between combined pills and progestin-only pills, and between brands. Discuss whether temporary barrier protection or emergency contraception is appropriate if pregnancy prevention may have been interrupted.

Seek prompt medical advice for repeated vomiting, inability to drink, worsening abdominal pain, faintness, unusual drowsiness, or concerning bleeding. Heavy bleeding may include soaking through pads rapidly, passing large clots, or feeling weak or faint.

Call emergency services for collapse, seizure, difficulty breathing, inability to wake, severe chest pain, sudden shortness of breath, or signs of stroke. These are emergency symptoms rather than reasons to wait for a routine appointment.

Store birth control pills in their original labeled package, out of sight and reach of children. A locked location is safest when young children are present. A daily reminder or pill organizer designed for the medication can help prevent accidental repeat doses, but the original package should remain available for identification.

Sources

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