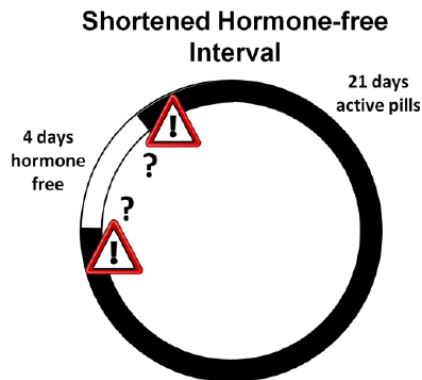


## Different Ways of Taking Combined Hormonal Contraception



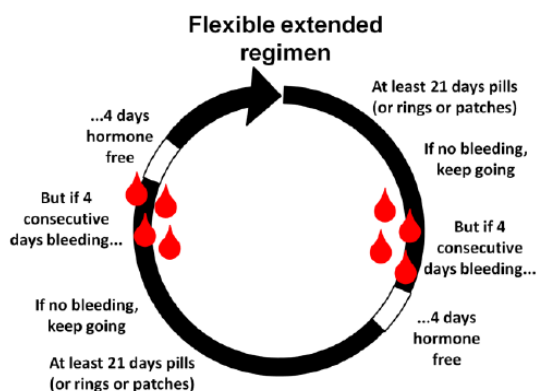
### **Shortened hormone free interval**

Shortening the break to 4 days instead of 7 builds in some extra leeway and protection if you forget to restart your pill. It is fine to restart the pill even if you are still bleeding.



### **Tricycling**

This means running 3 packs of pill, patch or vaginal ring together and only having a break after these 3 packs. So you take 9 weeks of continuous pills/patch or ring followed by 4 day break.



### **Flexible Extended**

With the flexible extended regimen take pills until bleeding occurs for 3-4 days, then have a pill free break (4-7 days). You must ensure you have taken at least 3 weeks of the pill before taking a break.

If the pill is taken continuously with no breaks, it is very likely that the lining of the womb will thicken a little and start to shed randomly which will result in irregular spotting and bleeding. We call this break-through bleeding. This break-through bleeding will happen at a different time in all pill takers as everyone's bodies are different.

### **Why have I been told to have a 7 day break in the past?**

The “pill” was developed back in the 1950s with the intent to mimic the natural female cycle. It was believed that women would want to have a monthly period so it was designed to be taken for 21 days followed by a 7-day break during which there would be a bleed. This regime is still the licensed or usual way to take the pill today but we now understand so much more about how it works and how we can make it work better for the women who use it. **We now suggest the pill can be taken in different ways known as tailored regimens, and the pill free break can be 4 days instead of 7.**

The bleed that occurs in the pill free break is not a proper period (as the pill switches off ovulation and therefore the natural cycle), it is just a hormone withdrawal bleed due to having stopped the pill. This bleed is not necessary for medical reasons.

### **What are the advantages of alternative regimes?**

- More leeway and therefore reduced pregnancy risk if you forget to restart your pill.
- Fewer bleeds and therefore less impact from the symptoms of bleeding such as pain.
- More control and flexibility over bleeding.

### **Is it safe?**

The Faculty of Sexual health and Reproductive Healthcare supports the use of these alternative regimes. These regimes are known as ‘off license’ as the pills are being taken in a different way from how they were originally licensed to be used but there is no evidence that taking the pill in any of these ways is harmful.

### **Reducing the hormone free interval could even be safer....**

Combined methods of contraception work by putting your ovaries to ‘sleep’ (switching off ovulation). During the 7-day pill free break the ovaries begin to “wake up” and by the end of the 7-day break some women are very close to ovulating. In fact, we know now that some women will release an egg the very next day if they do not restart their next packet on time. Therefore, if you forget to restart your pill after 7 days you may be at a high risk of pregnancy. Reducing the hormone free interval to 4 days, reduces this risk.

<b>The important rules to remember are:</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Never have more than one break a month and never take a break longer than 7 days (this is the licensed pill taking regime). Having less breaks and shorter breaks is fine.</b></li><li>• <b>And, if you miss pills then you should take at least 7 pills correctly before taking your next planned break.</b></li><li>• <b>Remember this only applies to combined pills (patch or vaginal ring), not progesterone only pills</b></li></ul> |
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