

# Free the Pill

## Prescription access vs. over-the-counter access: What's the difference?

In July 2023, the first-ever over-the-counter (OTC) birth control pill in the United States was approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and as of March 2024, Opill, a progestin-only birth control pill (POP), is available online and on shelves in retailers nationwide. Opill is now the most effective form of birth control available without a prescription in the US. With this new product on the market, it is important to understand the difference between prescription access and OTC access to birth control pills and other forms of OTC contraception (such as emergency contraception and condoms) that are also available in the US.

Here, we break down the biggest differences between the two models:

Two Models for Accessing Birth Control Methods in the United States		
	Prescription (Rx) Access	Over-the-Counter (OTC) Access
Location of pills	At a pharmacy behind the counter or in a provider's office	On the shelf at a retailer or pharmacy, online via a retailer website, or in a vending machine
Prescription	Required	Not required
Health care provider interaction	Required Interaction with a healthcare provider is required; the consumer must get a prescription from a provider. <a href="#">In some states, pharmacists are allowed to prescribe contraception.</a> To get a prescription, the consumer must visit a provider—either in-person or through telehealth.	Not required
Restrictions	<b>Some restrictions apply</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Age:</i> <a href="#">Some states require parental consent</a> for individuals under the age of 18 years old.</li><li>• <i>Gender:</i> Prescriptions are generally only available to patients who can become pregnant.</li><li>• <i>Obtaining prescription for a partner:</i> An individual cannot obtain a prescription for a partner.</li></ul>	<b>FDA determines who can safely and effectively use the product</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Age:</i> Opill, the first ever OTC birth control pill in the US, was approved for people of all ages with <b>no ID required for purchase</b>. Emergency contraception (EC) and condoms also do not have any age restrictions.</li><li>• <i>Gender:</i> OTC birth control products can be purchased by anyone, regardless of gender identity.</li><li>• <i>Obtaining birth control for a partner:</i> An individual may obtain birth control for their partner.</li></ul>

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<b>Insurance coverage</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Covered</b></p> <p>Under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) most health insurance plans are required to cover all FDA-approved methods of contraceptive methods, including birth control pills, without cost sharing. Unfortunately, many health insurance plans <b>require a prescription for coverage.</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Depends on insurance plan and state</b></p> <p>Though coverage of contraceptive methods is required under the ACA, many health insurance plans require a prescription to obtain coverage. Prescription requirements create barriers for obtaining OTC birth control. However, there are a growing number of health insurance plans that provide OTC coverage. <a href="#">Now nine states require certain private insurance or Medicaid plans to cover OTC birth control.</a></p>
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<b>Two Models for Accessing Birth Control Methods in the United States</b>		
	<b>Prescription (Rx) Access</b>	<b>Over-the-Counter (OTC) Access</b>
<b>Availability</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>During business hours of health care office, online provider or pharmacy</b></p> <p>In most health care offices, access is limited by availability of provider appointments.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>OTC models allow for access during the hours of online retailers, vending machines and stores which typically have more availability than provider offices.</b></p>
<b>Number of daily birth control pill options available</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Many products and brands</b></p> <p>There are many different types of prescription birth control pills on the market in the US. These formulations vary in their hormonal composition and fall into two categories: combined oral contraceptives (COCs) and progestin-only pills (POPs). Continuous-use or extended-cycle pills are types of COCs and contain more pills per pack, without any placebos.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>One brand/formulation—for now!</b></p> <p>Each birth control pill formulation must be approved separately by the FDA for OTC use. <b>Right now, <a href="#">Opill (a POP)</a> is the only daily birth control pill FDA-approved for OTC use in the US.</b> In the future, other types of birth control pills—including COCs and generics—may get approved and be made available OTC.</p>
<b>Other birth control methods (besides daily birth control pills)</b>	<p>Diaphragms, cervical caps, IUDs, implants, injections, patches, pH-modulating vaginal gel, vaginal rings, emergency contraception (levonorgestrel and ulipristal acetate), and condoms (internal/"female") are available by prescription. Sterilization is also an option. <a href="#">Learn more about contraception methods here.</a></p>	<p>Emergency contraception (levonorgestrel), condoms (external/"male" and internal/"female"), and spermicide are approved for OTC use and available online and in retailers nationwide. Nursing/chest feeding, fertility awareness, and withdrawal are also options. <a href="#">Learn more about all non-prescription methods here.</a></p>