

# Nutritional Needs of Oral Contraceptive Users

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An estimated 10 to 11 million women in the United States use oral contraceptives. Research is showing that these women need to pay attention to their dietary habits.

Researchers have found that oral contraceptives change the nutritional needs of some women. The levels of several vitamins and minerals in the blood are known to be or suspected to be influenced by "the pill." As a result, some oral contraceptive users need increased amounts of certain nutrients in their diets to maintain normal blood levels (a sign of adequate nutrition). Folic acid, a B vitamin, is of particular concern. All oral contraceptive users need an adequate supply of

folic acid. In addition, adequate amounts of vitamin C (ascorbic acid), vitamin B<sub>2</sub> (riboflavin), vitamin B<sub>6</sub> (pyridoxine), vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, and zinc are needed.

Vitamin and mineral supplements designed for oral contraceptive users are available on the market. These are not needed if the diet is well-balanced. The diet should include meat (or another protein source), milk and milk products, fruits and vegetables, and whole grain and enriched breads and cereals. Oral contraceptive users must be sure to include foods with the following nutrients in their diets to prevent deficiencies:

Nutrient	Function in Body	Food Sources
Folic acid	Needed for cell division, protein metabolism, and red blood cell maturation	Liver, nuts, asparagus, spinach, legumes (soybeans, kidney beans, lima beans), whole grain breads and cereals, oranges
Vitamin C (Ascorbic acid)	Needed for tissue structure and repair	Citrus fruits, tomatoes, cabbage, spinach, broccoli, potatoes
Vitamin B <sub>2</sub> (Riboflavin)	Needed for maintenance of a healthy nervous system and for normal cell metabolism including protein metabolism	Milk, cheese, liver, split peas, spinach, whole grain and enriched breads and cereals, meats
Vitamin B <sub>6</sub> (Pyridoxine)		Tuna, soybeans, nuts, bananas, spinach, whole grain breads and cereals, raisins, meats
Vitamin B <sub>12</sub>	Needed for red blood cell maturation	Liver, fish, meats, eggs
Zinc	Needed for utilization of food and for carbohydrate and protein metabolism	Whole grain breads and cereals, fish, eggs, nuts, meats

A balanced diet is especially important for three groups of oral contraceptive users:

- ✓ Teenage oral contraceptive users.  
Teenage girls taking oral contraceptives run a greater risk of developing nutritional deficiencies because their bodies already have high nutrient requirements for growth.
- ✓ Oral contraceptive users who smoke or take drugs.  
Cigarettes and drugs may add yet another insult to the body and increase nutrient

requirements. Smoking in particular increases the need for vitamin C.

- ✓ Oral contraceptive users who contemplate going off "the pill" to have a child.  
Pregnancy increases nutritional requirements. A woman should be well-nourished *before* conception so that nutritional deficiencies do not develop.

In view of present research findings, all oral contraceptive users should eat a wide variety of foods, including foods that are good sources of folic acid.

