



Family Planning Alliance Australia (FPAA) statement – 4 day pill free break

Currently the majority of Combined Oral Contraceptive (COCs) in Australia, including all COCs listed on the pharmaceutical benefits scheme (PBS), are dispensed in packaging which supplies 21 days of active hormone pills and 7 days of inactive pills (known as the hormone-free interval).

With the traditional 7 day hormone-free interval (HFI) there is a risk of breakthrough ovulation if a pill is missed, during the 7 days before or after the HFI. There are no clinical indications for this 7-day HFI, either within the context of a traditional 21/7-day pill regimen, or an extended pill regimen whereby active hormone pills are taken continuously without a break for 3-months or longer. A 4 day HFI reduces the risk of breakthrough ovulation and potentially reduces the risk of unintended pregnancy, particularly if recommencement of active pills at the start of the next cycle is delayed. Some newer COCs are packaged as a 24/4 or extended pill regimens but are not listed on the PBS. Current 21/7 COC packaging are marked with the days of the week as a memory aid and to assist the user in identifying missed pills.

FPAA advice is that confident COC users, in consultation with their health care provider, who do not need to use this memory aid can be supported to replace a 7 day HFI with a 4 day HFI (without the need to follow the directions on the package). People who choose to use an extended pill regimen can also elect to have a 4-day HFI rather than a 7 day HFI at the end of a cycle of running pill packets together without inactive pills. Those who choose a continuous regime of up 12 months or longer can have a 4-day HFI anytime (rather than waiting until the end of a cycle) if they experience 4 days of bleeding or spotting, provided they have already taken at least 21 consecutive active pills. This advice can be adapted for users of the vaginal ring. Note that these recommendations are off-label but are supported by expert national and international opinion and clinical practice.