

Historical Milestones of the Pill

In ancient times...

The ancient Greeks and Egyptians used a variety of suppositories including ground up pomegranate seeds and crocodile dung to try to prevent pregnancy.

The Middle Ages

People used condoms made from a variety of materials including animal intestines and sometimes even linen.

1850s

The rubber condom was first invented. Although it was known they could prevent pregnancy, they were primarily used as protection against sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea and syphilis.

1870s

German biologist Oskar Wilhelm August Hertwig was the first person to observe the process of fertilisation – the penetration of a sperm into an egg.

1880s

The first rubber diaphragm was developed which covered the cervix and creates a barrier that prevents sperm from reaching the egg.

Early 1900s: The start of research, the start of a movement

In 1901, physiologist Ludwig Haberlandt first understood the connection between ovulation and pregnancy. Haberlandt is sometimes referred to as the 'Grandfather of the Pill' due to his pioneering research.

In the 1915s, American social reformer Margaret Sanger coined the term "birth control" and began her decades-long crusade to bring safe and effective contraception into the mainstream.

In 1919, Haberlandt demonstrated that when the ovaries of pregnant rabbits were transplanted into non-pregnant animals, ovulation was inhibited and therefore pregnancy was prevented. This was the first indication that hormonal contraception was a viable option.

1920s – More than 80 years of hormone research

Walter Schoeller took over the main laboratory at Bayer Schering Pharma (then Schering AG) in 1923 and began research into sex hormones with Dohrn.

The first intrauterine devices (IUDs) were developed in Germany. Initially, IUDs were made from various materials including silkworm intestines and silver.

In England, reformer Marie Stopes opened birth control clinics and, in the same decade, the diaphragm was introduced in Australia.

1930s – Discoveries that paved the way for success

In 1933 the first birth control clinic in Australia was set up in Sydney.

In 1938, Hans Herloff Inhoffen and Walter Hohlweg at Schering developed the first synthetic oestrogen (female sex hormone) – ethinyl estradiol – which remains the most effective and widely used oestrogen component in oral contraceptives.

Research on a second sex hormone, progesterone, was also underway. The first oral progestin (a synthetic hormone that acts in a similar way to progesterone when administered orally and a common ingredient in modern contraceptive pills), was discovered by Inhoffen and Hohlweg in the same year.

1940s – A discovery in Mexico

In 1942, American chemist Russell Marker found that diosgenin, a compound extracted from the wild yam roots, *Dioscorea*, that grew in Mexico, could be efficiently manufactured into a progestin. Marker was able to achieve a remarkable reduction in the cost of producing synthetic progesterone (now called progestin) which provided other biologists with ready access to the hormone for experimentation.

1950s – A change is on the way

In the early 1950s, American birth control movement founder Margaret Sanger introduced reproductive physiologist and leader in hormone research, Gregory Pincus to suffragist Katherine McCormick.

McCormick provided financial support for developing a medicinal method of contraception.

Both Sanger and McCormick were central figures in the fight for birth control and were driven by a vision to help alleviate the misery that unwanted pregnancy caused, particularly in poor and immigrant populations.

In 1952, Djerassi synthesises norethisterone, an orally extremely active progestogen.

Pincus along with John Rock, an American gynaecologist from Harvard became a major developer of the Pill.

Because Massachusetts law banned the use of contraceptives, the first large-scale clinical trials of the modern-day Pill - a combination of hormones oestrogen and progestin - took place in Puerto Rico in 1956.

In this decade things were also changing in Australia. In the 1950s, women made up 23 per cent of the Australian workforce. Additionally television, another significant innovation, was first broadcast to Australians on 16 September 1956.