

sex talk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

wildfact

A human egg is one of the largest cells in the body – about 250 times larger than a white blood cell.

Q Can ovulation still occur while on the pill (taken consistently) and what happens to the egg if it does? Also, what happens if a pill is missed?

A. Yes, ovulation can occur while on the pill. More importantly, pregnancy can, too. Oral contraceptives are one of the most effective (99.7%) birth control methods available when the pills are taken exactly as prescribed. Unfortunately, no method guarantees perfect protection (only total abstinence is 100% effective).

Sometimes, women taking oral contraceptives do get pregnant. In “perfect” pill users, the annual rate of pregnancy is 0.3% (meaning 3 women in every 1000 pill users will get pregnant each year). In “typical” pill users, the rate of pregnancy is 8% (representing the 80 women in 1000 that will get pregnant each year while on oral contraceptives). Most women fall somewhere in between perfect and typical use, depending on how meticulous they are about taking their medication.

Once an egg is released, it continues its journey from the ovary, through the fallopian tube and into the uterus. If fertilization does not occur, the egg begins to disintegrate and is absorbed by the

body or swept away with the blood-rich lining of the uterus during menstruation. A human egg is 100-120 microns in diameter (smaller than the period at the end of this sentence). It would be very difficult to see without a microscope. Human sperm are even smaller at 5-7 microns in length.

Birth control pills work three ways to prevent pregnancy: they stop ovulation, thicken cervical mucus, and make the uterine lining thin. Missing a pill increases the chances an egg may be released and can cause “spotting” (light bleeding). The more pills missed, the more likely you are to get pregnant. If you miss one pill, take the missed pill as soon as you can. If you miss two pills, take one of the missed pills and today’s pill, and finish the pack on schedule. Use a backup method such as condoms and spermicide for the next seven days. For more detailed instructions visit www.health.arizona.edu.

