



Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health COVID-19 Coalition Shortage of norethisterone-containing pills in Australia: Advice for GPs

A global shortage of contraceptive pills containing the progestogen norethisterone (NET) has led to shortages in Australia since March 2020. The reason for the shortages, as provided by the manufacturer Pfizer, is "manufacturing delays" as the company states it is upgrading engineering on packaging lines and implementing additional packaging lines to rectify the shortages. At the time of writing, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) website indicates that the pills will become available in November-December 2020, however, there may be additional COVID-19-related delays. People using these particular pills are advised to see their doctor or nurse practitioner to discuss their options.

Further information is available on the TGA website here:

<https://apps.tga.gov.au/Prod/msi/Search/Details/norethisterone>

Table 1. Pfizer Australia Pty Ltd sponsored contraceptive pills that are currently unavailable in Australia (refer to the website for more details)

Name	Active ingredients	Predicted date available
NORIMIN-1 28 day tablet blister pack	ethinylestradiol norethisterone	02 Dec 2020
NORIMIN 28 day tablet blister pack	ethinylestradiol norethisterone	17 Nov 2020
BREVINOR 28 DAY tablet blister pack	ethinylestradiol norethisterone	11 Nov 2020
BREVINOR-1 28 DAY tablet blister pack	ethinylestradiol norethisterone	16 Oct 2020
NORINYL-1 28 DAY tablet blister pack	mestranol norethisterone	28 Aug 2020

NORIDAY 28 DAY norethisterone 350 microgram tablet blister pack	norethisterone	15 Nov 2020
---	----------------	-------------

During this shortage healthcare practitioners can provide advice on alternative contraceptive options while taking into account the individual's concerns, which may include method side-effects and risks, non-contraceptive benefits and cost. The opportunity to raise awareness regarding the range of contraceptives available in Australia, including long-acting reversible contraception (LARC; IUDs and implant), should be encouraged. LARC methods, in particular, are highly effective and cost-effective compared to oral contraception and are not reliant on access to repeat supplies once inserted – an added benefit in these uncertain times. See the SRH Coalition consensus statement on LARC for up-to-date advice during COVID-19 and other consensus statements here: <https://www.spherecre.org/coalition-outputs>.

The NET-containing combined pills (eg, Brevinor and Norimin) are Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS)-listed and have a safety profile equivalent to the PBS-listed levonorgestrel (LNG) pills. Both types of oral contraception are recommended as a good first choice in medically-eligible people who choose this method. Their side-effect profile, including nausea, breast tenderness, and headaches, appears similar to other combined pills in clinical trials, but it should be noted that on an individual basis, some people may experience side-effects with some pills and not with others.

While NET-containing pills can be a good choice for people experiencing acne and for those with breakthrough bleeding on other pills and potentially for heavy menstrual bleeding, other oestrogen-containing pills can also be effective for these conditions. A Cochrane review¹ found few important differences between pill types in the effectiveness for treating acne. It is also important to be aware that head-to-head trials comparing one pill type with another for non-contraceptive benefits are lacking. While some of the more expensive non-PBS listed pills containing anti-androgenic or less androgenic progestogens (eg, drospirenone or dienogest) can be a good choice, so too can the cheaper LNG pills, as while LNG is relatively androgenic the oestrogen component has an overriding beneficial effect.

Progestogen-only pills (mini-pills or POPs) are a method of choice for people who cannot or prefer not to use an oestrogen-containing method and who prefer an oral option. The PBS-listed NET progestogen-only pill (Noriday) is currently unavailable, but other PBS-listed POPs, including Microlut, remain available with no evidence for a difference in effectiveness or side-effect profile between types.

In summary, supporting a switch from a NET-containing pill to an alternative oral method will depend on side-effect profile, added benefits and affordability, and awareness should be raised about the highly effective and cost-effective LARC methods. These recommendations have been summarised in an infographic which can be viewed under <https://www.spherecre.org/coalition-outputs>.

REFERENCES

1. Arowojulu, AO, Gallo MF, Lopez LM, Grimes DA. Combined oral contraceptive pills for treatment of acne. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2012, Issue 7. Art. No.: CD004425. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD004425.pub6