

Science & sex

There are many ways to prevent pregnancy. Hope is not one of them.



A range of contraceptive pills is now available. Inset shows a historical collection of contraceptives.

Contraceptives have been used to try and prevent pregnancy for more than 2000 years. Crocodile dung, lemons, weasles' testicles, amulets and potions have all been tried at some stage.¹

EUREKA!



Arthur Birch, on the NSW coast with his granddaughter. He said the contraceptive pill came too late for himself (with five children) but that he had no regrets.

Take one pill once a day to control fertility. Contraception was not the aim of chemist Arthur Birch. He refined a chemical reaction in 1950—now called the Birch Reduction Method²—that allowed the activity of steroids to be modified.

The reaction was used to produce progesterin, an orally active version of the steroid hormone progesterone that prevents ovulation, and the main component of the **combined oral contraceptive pill**.

Today 70 million women across the world take the oral contraceptive pill.³ It is also the preferred contraceptive choice for 52 per cent of visitors to Australian Family Planning Clinics.⁴

WHAT NEXT?

The expanding human **population** still poses a major challenge for our world.

The pill has played a role in reducing birth rates in most developed countries to replacement level. However, over 80 per cent of the world's population of 6.3 billion lives in developing countries where there is an enormous unmet demand for contraception.^{5,6}

Australia is surrounded by some of the most densely populated and rapidly growing nations on earth.



The United Nations Population Fund provides funding for population and reproductive health programs in developing countries.

I remember the exact location at my bench where I stood...It was instantaneously obvious to me that this was the beginning of an era.

Arthur Birch

1. Hymes, N E (1963). *A Medical History of Contraception*. New York: Gamut Press.
2. Birch, A J (1944). *J.Chem. Soc.* 430.
3. Guillebaud, J (1997). *The Pill*. Oxford University Press.
4. Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia (2002) *Annual Report 2001–2002*.
5. Short, R V (2001). The future fertility of mankind: effect on world population growth and migration. *Reprod. Fertil. Devel.*, 13, 405–410.
6. Australian Bureau of Statistics (www.abs.gov.au).