

## **Consumer Fact Sheet: Oral Contraceptives**

### **Background**

The situation of unwanted pregnancies has been around for thousands of years. Contraceptives have been around for about 55 of those years. Oral contraceptives, or OCs, have been in use for roughly 46 of them, since 1960, when the FDA approved their use (FDA, 2006, August 24). About 6 out of 10 pregnancies in the United States were unplanned as of 1995, according to a report by the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine (FDA, 1997). Not only do OCs reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancies, they help prevent the quagmire of the pro-life pro-choice debate, at least for people who use OCs. This issue will not be explored in depth in this paper for the purpose of avoiding a philosophical debate.

There are many different types of contraceptives available. The specific method the individual uses is, or should be, dependent on the individual's sexual habits and preferences. OCs are just one of many options. They rely on the use of human-made forms of naturally occurring female hormones. Estrogens would normally influence the monthly growth of the endometrium, the lining of the uterus, and the development and continued growth of breasts. Progesterones would normally be made towards the end of the menstrual cycle in response to the implantation of a fertilized egg on the endometrium. Different combinations and levels of these hormones create different types of OCs. The three most common are combined oral contraceptives (COCs), progestin only pills (POPs), and Plan B, which will be discussed below. COCs most commonly contain estrogen and progesterone, or progestin, a human made form of progesterone. POPs contain only progestin. Because POPs do not contain estrogen, they do not cause blood clots, unlike COCs. Both COCs and POPs are taken everyday. Plan B is available in both a COC and a POP form. Plan B is able to work as a form of emergency contraception

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through the use of higher doses of hormones. The FDA recently approved the use of Plan B as an over-the-counter medication for women age 18 and over, and as a prescription for those under 18. The effects of taking OCs are currently believed to be completely reversible (Whole paragraph equally from FDA Consumer Magazine, 1997 and NCI Web site, 2006, May 4).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the United States, approximately 1.2 million recorded abortions occur each year (PubMed, 2004, May). About half of these are not the person's first abortion (PubMed, 2004, May). For the purpose of making this easier on the reader and the writer, we will consider the problem to be the need for women to go through such extreme measures to combat one of the most natural occurrences in human existence. Is it possible that modern society's values and views of what is important and proper have shifted so far from what they used to be? Healthy People 2010 does not acknowledge the existence of oral contraceptives, or even abortion for that matter, much less conceptualize them.

As stated above, one reason that increasingly larger numbers of women, young and old, are using oral contraceptives as opposed to other methods of birth control may be the fact that they prefer not to go through all 12 menstrual cycles per year, especially if the individual experiences severe cramps or mood disorders.

Possibly more importantly, OCs are not without risk. Many studies have been conducted to determine whether OCs have an effect on the development of cancer, yet the results of which are usually inconclusive or contradictory. In general, POPs are believed not to influence the development of cancer COCs, on the other hand, are believed to increase the risk of developing breast, cervical, and liver cancers, and to decrease the risk of developing endometrial (uterine) and ovarian cancers. (NCI, 2006,

May 4) OCs have been shown to reduce the risk of developing pelvic inflammatory disease as well (FDA, 1997, April).

### **Epidemiologic Picture of the Problem**

In 2002, 19% of all women age 15 to 44, 11.6 million of them, were using some form of oral contraceptive (CDC 2004, October 12). Provided that the sample section for this statistic is reliable and nonbiased, this is a fairly surprising figure. In 2002, approximately 40% of all women age 15 to 19 received some sort of service from a medical provider for a family planning issue. With the same criteria, about 63% of women age 20 to 24 received a service; 55% age 25 to 29, 47% age 30 to 34, 31% age 35 to 39, 20% age 40 to 44 (CDC, 2004, October 12). Thus, it can be interpreted that women age 20 to 24 are the most likely age group to be interested in planned pregnancy issues.

Believe it or not, men and women are both affected by this issue. In a survey study of 109 women obtaining abortions, most reported that their male partner was fulfilling a supportive and positive decision making role.

The effectiveness of OCs is good compared to other methods. Their failure rate is about 1-2 pregnancies out of 100 women per year (FDA, 1997, April).

### **Solutions to the Problem**

[www.arhp.org](http://www.arhp.org) is addressing the issue of abortion. ARHP is short for the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals. They have many different sections in their site that address a variety of issues related to the reproduction. They have sections helping people in medical school, and they also have a “patient education” section that aims at providing a wealth of information for people.

[www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) is short for the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. They are pretty much the same thing as the ARHP, but with a different name.

[www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov) is short for the National Women's Health Information Center. Seeing as it is a government run organization, it is safe to assume that its information is reliable and usually relevant. It aims at just providing information about health topics specifically relevant to women.

### **Internet Resources**

[www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov) is a great Web site. It relates to oral contraceptives because it is one of the only Web sites I could find that the search feature actually turned up a tremendous amount of information about almost any health related topic, including the one of oral contraceptives.

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/oral-contraceptives> has a narrower band of information than other Web sites, but it provides a better description than one could hope for of the effect of oral contraceptives on the development or prevention of cancer. This site can probably be traced back to the domain if one was interested in a broader range of issues regarding cancer.

[http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/global\\_health/pop/news/familyplanning.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/pop/news/familyplanning.html) is a Web site from the usaid.gov domain. While the USAID (United States Association for International Development) is interested in a much broader range of topics than just abortion and family planning, this article is interesting and optimistic. It states the relationship between the use of family planning by women and a decreased need to rely on abortion.

### **Works Cited**

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### **Oral Contraceptives (Class Handout)**

- oral contraceptives, OC's, approved for use by the FDA in 1960, have been in use ever since. (FDA, 2006, August 24)
- make use of naturally occurring hormones to decrease the frequency of the female's ovulation and menstruation cycle.
- OC's fall in three main categories:
  - combined oral contraceptives, COC's, contain both progestin and estrogen, taken daily, believed by some to increase one's risk of breast, cervical, and liver cancer, and to reduce the risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer. (FDA Consumer Magazine, 1997; NCI Website, 2006, May 4)
  - progestin only pills, POP's, contain only progestin, taken daily, not believed to influence the development of cancer. (FDA Consumer Magazine, 1997; NCI Website, 2006, May 4)
  - Plan B, emergency contraception, the morning after pill, available in both COC and POP form, much higher doses of hormones, taken for only a short time, currently available as an over the counter drug for women over 18, and as a prescription for those under 18. (FDA Consumer Magazine, 1997)
- approximately 1.2 million abortions occur each year, half are repeat abortions. (PubMed, 2004, May 4)
- in 2002, 19% of all women in the U.S. used some form of oral contraceptive, the figure is only going up. (CDC, 2004, October 12)
- in 2002, approximately 40% of women age 15-19 received some service from family planning organization through a medical provider
  - age 20-24, 62%; age 25-29, 55%; age 30-34, 47%; age 35-39, 31%; age 40-44, 20%. (CDC, 2004, October, 12)
- in a survey of 109 women obtaining abortions in a Baltimore clinic, 30-33% were accompanied by their male partner, the most common person to accompany a woman there. (PubMed, 2004, May)