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Oral Contraceptives vs Cancer: An Ongoing Debate

by Dr. Suzanne Swarengen

Birth control pills have been in use in the United States since the 1960s. Over the course of time and continued research, many questions have arisen about the long-term health effects they have on the body. There are some contradicting opinions regarding this class of drugs and the health benefits and/or risks they may present. Some say they increase the potential for developing cancer, while others say there is an inherent decreased risk of cancer associated with oral contraceptives. The only way to answer this debate for oneself is to consider the facts and the role they play in the factors at hand.

As with any drug, one should always consider the overall effect the use of hormonal birth control will have on them specifically. According to reliable research, factors such as lifestyle, family history and potential side effects of the drug must be carefully considered. Generally speaking, the use of oral contraceptives is safe and effective in preventing unexpected pregnancy as well as in treating menstrual-related issues. The questions arise with long-term use and the use in women more than 35 years of age. Here are some facts that can help clarify some of the confusion in order to make an informed decision that best suits one's circumstances.

The pros must outweigh the cons before taking a substance that induces a physiological change in the body. The well-documented benefits to using oral contraceptives include a reduction in risk of certain types of cancer. As compared to women who have never taken birth control pills, those who have taken them for five or more years have a 40-50 percent decreased chance of developing ovarian or endometrial cancer. This percentage improves to 80 percent at 10 years of birth control pill usage. However, after about 10 years of discontinuing the

pill, the risk levels return to one's original risk-factor percentage. A recent study suggests that colorectal cancer risk declines by 20 percent for those who had taken oral contraceptives for one or more years. Other classes of hormonal contraceptives such as the mini pill, combination pills, injections, patches and implants have additional factors to consider and should be carefully reviewed with the prescribing physician before beginning such a regimen. For example, the combination type birth control pills are believed to be linked to increased risk of liver, cervical and breast cancer.

The real debate involves breast cancer. Much of the research reveals contradicting information. This is due to the fact that earlier generation birth control pills contained more estrogen than current pills. The general consensus is that it *could* increase one's risk for breast cancer. The main factors to consider are family and personal medical history. If one is at a high risk for breast cancer, it is suggested to reconsider the long-term use of birth control pills. Age is also believed to play a role. It is thought that women more than 45 years of age who are still taking birth control pills are 1.5 times more likely to develop breast cancer than those who never used them.

It can be overwhelming when trying to make an informed decision based on available medical research alone. The best plan is to learn your family history to the best of your ability to determine your overall risk factors. Then write down any questions or concerns and discuss them with a trusted physician.

For the long term, pay attention to your body and provide it with the nutrients and means it needs to perform at its highest under the circumstances of your lifestyle.

Suzanne Swarengen, DOM, AP, is a board certified, licensed acupuncture physician. In her work, she strives to provide compassionate care for individuals seeking wholistic solutions for ailments, illnesses and maintenance of good health. She can be reached for more info or an appointment at the Alternative Health Clinic 843-692-9243 and South Strand Cardiology 843-293-2700. See ad page 12.