

# How Safe Is My Oral Contraceptive?

## *What Are Oral Contraceptives?*

Oral contraceptives are medications taken to prevent pregnancy. You might hear them also called other names such as the Pill, OCs, BCs, BC tablets, or birth control pills. Combination oral contraceptives contain two types of hormones, estrogen and progestin. These hormones work to prevent pregnancy by stopping ovulation (release of an egg), thickening cervical mucus to prevent sperm from entering the uterus, and thinning the lining of the uterus.

## *Health Concerns*

**Breast cancer.** Concerns about oral contraceptives causing breast cancer have increased since hormone replacement therapy (HRT), another form of estrogen and progestin, has been linked to an increased risk of breast cancer in postmenopausal women. But recently, it has been shown that oral contraceptives are NOT associated with a risk of breast cancer, especially when used before the age of 45. This includes long-term users and women with a family history of breast cancer.

The difference in risk between women taking HRT and women using oral contraceptives seems confusing, but it might have something to do with the ages of the women. Oral contraceptives are used by younger women who generally have a lower risk of breast cancer.

Since most risk factors for breast cancer can't be changed, finding cancer early is important. Monthly breast self-exams, yearly visits to your healthcare professional, and regular mammography for women 40 and over are recommended.

**Cardiovascular.** Oral contraceptives have been associated with increased blood clotting, heart attack, and stroke. These problems were more common with older formulations, which contained higher amounts of estrogen than the pills used by women today. For healthy, nonsmoking women using low-dose oral contraceptives (<50 mcg estrogen) there is no increased risk for heart attack or stroke, and much less chance of clotting problems. Women with special health problems such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, and diabetes have an increased risk for serious problems from

oral contraceptive use. If you have one of these health problems, it might be safe for you to use oral contraceptives under certain conditions. Your healthcare professional can determine if oral contraceptives are appropriate for you.

Smoking increases the risk of heart attack and stroke with oral contraceptive use. This risk is greatly increased in women over 35 years old or in women who smoke heavily ( $\geq 15$  cigarettes/day). You should not smoke while taking combination oral contraceptives, especially if you are over 35 years old.

## *Health Benefits*

Oral contraceptives provide many short-term and long-term benefits, and are sometimes used for reasons not related to birth control. Some women take oral contraceptives to control menstrual bleeding problems and painful menstruation. Oral contraceptives can reduce menstrual cramps and pain; and decrease the amount of menstrual bleeding. Acne, caused by higher levels of testosterone, can also be improved by oral contraceptives, which help lower testosterone.

Some of the long-term benefits of oral contraceptives include protection against pelvic inflammatory disease; reduced risks of ovarian, endometrial, and colorectal cancers; and increased bone strength, which might be good for osteoporosis prevention.

## *Should I Use Oral Contraceptives?*

The decision to use oral contraceptives should be discussed with your healthcare professional. Oral contraceptives are NOT recommended for women with cancer of the breast or uterus, vaginal bleeding of an unknown cause, a history of clots in the legs or lungs, severe high blood pressure, or liver problems. Oral contraceptives can commonly cause nausea, breast tenderness, mood swings, and headache. If these side effects become bothersome, let your healthcare professional know. Switching to a different oral contraceptive product can often help. Inform your healthcare professional immediately if you experience stomach or chest pain, shortness of breath, severe headache, dizziness, vision problems, or severe leg pain.