

## The Pill:

# Benefits outweigh the risks

Twenty years after the introduction of oral contraceptives, and their use by an estimated 150 million women, it is clear that the pill results in some health risk. However, numerous studies show that for most healthy young women the benefits outweigh the risks. Serious complications could be avoided if doctors would help their patients to understand which of them could expect to use the pill safely, and if the lowest dose possible was prescribed.

Cardiovascular disease, the most serious health risk, could be greatly reduced if women using the pill would not smoke, and if doctors would not prescribe oral contraceptives for women with histories of hypertension, high cholesterol levels, and diabetes. Women who smoke heavily and use the pill have 39 times the risk compared with women who neither smoke nor use the pill.

Age is also an important factor, but it has been shown that women

under 35 run little risk of heart attack as a result of pill use. Women over 35 should, however, consider other effective methods of fertility control. Recent studies have suggested that the amounts of estrogen and progesterin in the pill play a significant role in some cardiovascular diseases. It is imperative that doctors prescribe the lowest dose consistent with efficacy, and provide their patients with full details concerning the risks and benefits of the pill's use. Women must also inform their physician of any pre-existing conditions which might increase the risk of serious complications.

The overwhelming majority of studies which have examined the pill's carcinogenicity find that there is no evidence that the pill use causes cancer of the ovaries, uterus or breasts. There is, however, some evidence that the pill protects against ovarian cancer. Long term cancer risks which may develop 20 or 30 years

after pill use is discontinued are not yet clear.

On the other hand, the incidence of at least four diseases are reduced by the use of oral contraceptives. Benign breast

important non-contraceptive benefits of the pill is the protection against pelvic inflammatory disease. Pill users appear to have only half the risk of contracting this common, but serious infection.

Since powerful hormones can affect all the body systems, it is not surprising that a variety of adverse consequences have been ascribed to pill use. Most of these consequences now appear unfounded. Pill use may delay child bearing by several months, but inherent fertility is not impaired, and pill users run no higher risk of complications during pregnancy. Another benefit to be considered is that maternal mortality rates are approximately five times higher than pill-associated mortality.

Janet Armstrong

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disease, ovarian cysts, iron deficiency, and rheumatoid arthritis are less likely to develop in pill users. One of the most

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