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**LONG TERM USE OF ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES OF FIVE OR MORE YEARS IS ASSOCIATED WITH AN INCREASED RISK OF CERVICAL CANCER. WOMEN WHO TOOK ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES FOR OVER TEN YEARS HAVE A FOUR TIMES HIGHER RISK OF DEVELOPING CERVICAL CANCER.**

ATLANTA (April 3, 2012) – Women may take oral contraceptives for many health reasons ranging from controlling acne to lowering their risk of ovarian cancer over an extended period of time. What women don't know is that their prolonged use of oral contraceptives is increasing their odds of getting cervical cancer says researchers for the National Cancer Institute.

The NCI has conducted and collected information from various research projects that conclude a women's risk of contracting cervical cancer rises with extended use of oral contraceptives. Experts say the oral contraceptives are not 100% at fault, but it's really error on the person taking oral contraceptives.

Research done by the NCI shows that the main reason why women take oral contraceptives is to prevent against pregnancy; therefore they use it as a type of contraceptive. With birth control as a woman's main contraceptive, they are less likely to use another type of contraceptive like condoms. Not only do condoms protect against HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), but it also protects against the transmission of HPV (Human Papilloma Virus).

According to the CDC, almost all cervical cancers are caused by HPV which is a common virus that can only be passed through sexual intercourse. Some HPV viruses cause changes on a woman's cervix that can lead to cell abnormalities, which can lead to cancer cell development over time. For most women, HPV will go away on its own because a women's body fights off the virus itself, but sometimes that is not always the case.

The National Cancer Institute states that the hormones in oral contraceptives may change the susceptibility of the cervical cells to the HPV infection, making it harder for combatant cells of the body to clear the virus. The hormones in birth control also cause the cells to aggressively change and progress into cervical cancer cells. In a 2002 report done by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, shows that once a woman stops taking oral contraceptives over a period of time their risk for contracting cervical cancer declines drastically. More research is in progress of the topic and many scientists are hoping they will find promising results through the process.

Until then, the CDC is recommending women who are sexually active and on oral contraceptives get a Pap test (also known as Pap Smear) every year after the age of 21, or three years after their first sexual encounter (whichever comes first). The CDC also urges women from ages 13-26 to get the two HPV vaccines to help prevent certain types of HPV as well as to use condoms during sex regardless if they are on oral contraceptives. Lastly, they also suggest women limit their number of sexual partners as well. For more information, please visit the CDC's website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).

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*“The National Cancer Institute coordinates the National Cancer Program, which conducts and supports research, training, health information dissemination, and other programs with respect to the cause, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of cancer, rehabilitation from cancer, and the continuing care of cancer patients and the families of cancer patients.”*

## Background

April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012 –

### **Uncertainty in the link between Oral Contraceptive Devices and Cervical Cancer**

As of March 2012, approximately 12 million US women were taking an oral contraceptive device, better known as the ‘the pill’ according to WebMD.com. Even though there are two different types of hormonal birth control pills (estrogen and progesterone, or progesterone solely) both types have been linked to an increased risk of cervical cancer. Due to the pros and cons of taking oral contraceptives, many suggest that further testing needs to be done on the matter considering drug companies as well as the Center of Disease Control (CDC) say that sexual behavior and other factors need to be evaluated and taken into consideration when it comes to calculating risk. (Bayer, 2012)

The National Cancer Institute, one of eleven agencies that compose the Department of Health and Human Services in the United States, says that a woman’s risk of cervical cancer on the pill increases because women are more prone to contracting the HPV virus because they only use birth control as a contraceptive. (NCI, 2012) HPV, which is short for the Human Papilloma Virus is the most common way a woman can contract cervical cancer. (CDC, 2012) Some studies have linked woman who have given birth to three or more children as a risk for getting cervical cancer, but that has yet to be 100% proven. (CDC, 2012)

### **Current Warnings by OCD Manufacturers**

Bayer, the manufacturer for the three top taken birth controls by women in America (Yasmin, Yaz, Beyaz) is keeping mum about the subject, and is only warning women about the increased risk in their fine writing. The only information found on their website about the increased risk of cervical cancer from taking OCD’s was in a PDF file of the little packet that women get with every month’s supply of the pill. The manual contains directions for taking the pill, when to start a new pack, or what to do if a sexually active woman misses a pill, and those types of things. In the back, there are other warnings as well including the risk of stroke, heart attack, and blood clots. Under the section 5.3 titled ‘Carcinoma of the Breasts and Reproductive Organs’ Bayer finally states the risk of cervical cancer. “Some studies suggest that COCs are associated with an increase in the risk of cervical cancer or intraepithelial neoplasia.

However, there is controversy about the extent to which these findings may be due to differences in sexual behavior and other factors.” (Bayer, 2012)

Pfizer, another major birth control manufacturer in the United States, who recently had to recall more than one million packs of birth control for defective packaging that could lead to pregnancy, is also keeping mum about the increased risk of cervical cancer from taking the pill as well. Only in their birth control packets do they list cervical cancer as an increased cancer risk with taking the pill. Nothing is listed on their website under cons or increased risk when taking birth control.

The National Cancer Institute lists that there is an increased cancer risk with taking OCD’s. The NCI says

it increases the chances also of endometrial cancer and breast cancer. Breast cancer is sighted as a risk under certain criteria and demographics in women including medical history, race, and age. (NCI, 2012)

### **Studies Showing Increased Risk of Cervical Cancer**

A study done by the IRAC in 2005, says that a woman who takes an OCD over a period of five or more years has an increased risk in cervical cancer. (NCI, 2012) However, the NCI website also states that a women's risk of cervical cancer declines over time if she stops taking OCD's. Research has also found that a woman's risk decreases the same amount over a period of time for women who were on the pill longer (10+ years) then women who were on it for short periods of time (5 years and below). (NCI, 2012)

In 2002, a study done by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, which is part of the World Health Organization, compared data from eight studies to assess an association between women already infected with HPV and had used contraceptives for 5 to 9 years. The study found that these women were three times more likely to get cervical cancer then women who were on it for less than 5 years, or were not on any oral contraceptive at all. The study also found that women who were on oral contraceptives for more than ten years had a four times higher risk of getting cancer.

According to WebMD, current research shows that OCD's over a long period of time make the cells on the cervix more vulnerable to infection and disease then woman who aren't on OCD's.

### **The Contradiction**

Many doctors and researchers say that a woman's chance for cervical cancer while taking OCD is more operators 'error' then the birth controls fault. (CDC, 2012) WebMD's website says that women who take oral contraceptive devices usually don't use another form of contraceptive like condoms. Condoms are the only contraceptive device that protects against the spreading of the HIV virus that causes AIDS, STD's like genital warts and chlamydia, and lastly HPV among sexual partners.

Also, women already infected with the HPV virus one or more times should consider not going on birth control for the risk of turning the virus into possible cancer cells. More studies are being done on the risk of birth control and cervical cancer risk now in the U.S. according to NCI's website.

### **How to Lower Your Risk**

The CDC and WebMD recommend a number of ways that women can protect themselves against HPV and lower their risk of contracting cervical cancer while taking birth control.

- Use condoms on top of birth control when having sex
- Get a pap smear done every year after the age of 21, or three years after your first sexual encounter regardless of age.
- Get the two HPV vaccines that protect certain strains of the virus
- Limit sexual partners
- Get an IUD put in place. According to a study done by Lancet Oncology in 2011 it actually prevents cervical cancer in women who have one placed for more than four years.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to cervical cancer and birth control, there are many different risks to consider, but using birth control is one risk you should consider a serious one. Numerous research studies have showed that birth control does increase your risk of cervical cancer tremendously after being on the pill for five plus years. Your risk increases even more after ten years on the pill. Women who have already contracted HPV before going on the pill should consult with their doctor before deciding to go on the pill. There are many things woman can do to prevent them from contracting HPV while on the pill, or lower their risk of contracting it again before the HPV could turn into cancer. More research is being done to calculate the risk and iron the out facts even more than what current and past studies have already shown. Women should be pro-active about their own health and informing yourself is one way to protect your future.

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