

All forms of hormonal contraception carry breast cancer risk, study finds

Research shows small increase in risk until about five years after contraception is stopped, despite hopes that newer types might prove safer

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Wednesday 6 December 2017 22.00 GMT

Last modified on Wednesday 6 December 2017 22.04 GMT

All forms of the pill and other hormonal contraception carry a small risk of breast cancer, which lasts for about five years after women stop taking it, according to new research.

The increased risk has been known for some time, but there were hopes that newer forms of hormonal contraception – such as those which release progesterone only – would be safer. However, [the new study in the New England Journal of Medicine](#) confirms the 20% added risk that women run – although that is still very small for those not at high risk already.

Among women taking the pill for five years, the study suggests, there would be an extra one case for every 1500 women.

The study is very large, including 1.8 million women in Denmark who were followed up for nearly 11 years on average. The Danish researchers found that the risk of breast cancer was higher in women who used the pill or other forms of hormonal contraception, including IUDs, for longer. It was also higher in those who were older – most of the breast cancer cases were in women over 40.

In a commentary with the study, Professor David Hunter, of the Nuffield Department of Population [Health](#), said that the small risks of the pill needed to be set against the benefits, which included not only preventing an unwanted pregnancy but also a “substantial reductions in the risks of ovarian, endometrial and colorectal cancers in later life”.

But he called for more effort to be invested in safer forms of the pill. “These data suggest that the search for an oral contraceptive that does not elevate the risk of breast cancer needs to continue. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was some optimism regarding the development of a formulation that would reduce a woman’s risk of breast cancer, but research into this possibility appears to have stalled,” he writes.

Kevin McConway, emeritus professor of applied statistics at the Open University, said the study found the increase in risk disappeared gradually over a few years once women stop taking the pill.

“Like most other studies on hormonal contraceptives and breast cancer risk, this one is observational, so it cannot prove conclusively that the hormonal contraception is definitely the cause of the increased risk. However, the researchers did allow statistically for most of the important factors that might also be involved, and they give good reasons why the differences in risk that they found are likely to be causally related to the contraceptives.

“I’m not a medical doctor, but my assessment is that this new evidence doesn’t make an important change to what was previously known about hormonal contraceptives and breast cancer risk. It just brings it further up to date and adds some detail. Certainly I’d advise anyone who is concerned about risks to talk to their doctor before making any changes in their contraceptive use.”

Using the pill can protect women from certain cancers 'for up to 30 years'

From data compiled over 44 years, researchers found women were protected from bowel, endometrial and ovarian cancer by taking the contraceptive pill

Press Association

Wednesday 22 March 2017 01.06 GMT

Last modified on Wednesday 20 September 2017 19.09 BST

Women who have taken the contraceptive pill are protected from some types of cancer for as long as 30 years after they stopped taking it, according to new research.

Those who have used the pill “during their reproductive years” are less likely to have bowel cancer, endometrial cancer or ovarian cancer than women who had never taken it, a study at the University of Aberdeen found.

Researchers also looked at the risk of all types of cancer in women who have taken the pill during their reproductive years and found it does not lead to new cancer risks later in life.

The results are the latest published from the longest-running study in the world into the effects of taking the contraceptive pill.

Established by the Royal College of General Practitioners in 1968, the Oral Contraception Study was set up to look at the long-term health effects of oral contraceptives.

The latest study, led by Dr Lisa Iversen, relates to 46,000 women followed for up to 44 years.

Iversen, research fellow in the Institute of Applied [Health](#) Sciences at the university, said: “Because the study has been going for such a long time we are able to look at the very long-term effects, if there are any, associated with the pill.

“What we found from looking at up to 44 years’ worth of data was that having ever used the pill, women are less likely to get colorectal, endometrial and ovarian cancer.

“So, the protective benefits from using the pill during their reproductive years are lasting for at least 30 years after women have stopped using the pill.

“We were also interested in what the overall balance of all types of cancer is amongst women who have used the pill as they enter the later stages of their life. We did not find any evidence of new cancer risks appearing later in life as women get older.

“These results from the longest-running study in the world into oral contraceptive use are reassuring. Specifically, pill users don’t have an overall increased risk of cancer over their lifetime and that the protective effects of some specific cancers last for at least 30 years.”

The study, which has received funding from bodies including the Medical Research Council, Imperial [Cancer](#) Research Fund and the British Heart Foundation, published its latest findings in the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.