

# The Pill, Health and Society

## The birth-control pill, 50 years later

In 1960 the Food and Drug Administration approved the combined oral contraceptive pill, or birth-control pill, for use in the United States, thus beginning a social experiment with grave and far reaching consequences. Despite its health risks and other side effects, millions of women today rely on the synthetic hormones contained in “the pill” to inhibit otherwise healthy fertility.

To find out more about the pill’s effects on health and society, Columbia interviewed Dr. James J. Joyce, a physician who practices family medicine, including obstetrics, in southwestern Minnesota. A member of St. Mary’s Council 3134 in Sleepy Eye, Minn., Dr. Joyce has worked as a medical consultant in natural procreative technology and as a Fertility Care Center consultant since 1992.

**Columbia:** When the birth control pill was first approved for contraceptive use, it was unlike any drug that came before it. It was not intended to treat disease but to suppress a normal biological function. How did this come about?

**Dr. Joyce:** Medical ethics demands that medicines given need to be proven less risky than the disease they treat. With enough false premises, some have concluded that if pregnancy (which is not a disease) has risks, then any method of avoiding pregnancy is justifiable if it is less risky than pregnancy.

**Columbia:** Many people are led to believe that the birth control pill is “safe.” How serious are the side effects and health risks for women taking the pill?

**Dr. Joyce:** The various contraceptive pills used today have a long list of side effects published and available in print or online. Changes in blood clotting that lead to strokes, lung problems and heart attacks are some of the more serious short-term risks. Long term risks include a 40% increased risk premenopausal breast cancer if they are taken before the first full-term pregnancy, as well as an increased risk of cervical cancer.

**Columbia:** How would you respond to the recent Time magazine cover story that reported the findings of a 40-year study: “Women who take the pill are less likely to die prematurely from any cause, including cancer and heart disease”?

**Dr. Joyce:** Statements and studies like that demand a thorough review for any sources of bias, collateral negative effects and internal mathematical game-playing. After all, it defies logic to suggest that taking drugs to suppress the body’s normal function is healthier than allowing the body to function as it’s supposed to.

**Columbia:** Is the pill ever prescribed for reasons other than preventing pregnancy?

**Dr. Joyce:** Since these drugs have been on the market, physicians have used them for the management of many conditions. But they are not a cure for any disease. Their use can mask serious conditions where symptoms such as abnormal bleeding or painful menstruation are the only clue to the underlying problem.

**Columbia:** Is it true that contraceptives such as the pill can act as abortifacients – that is, by causing the death of a human embryo shortly after conception?

**Dr. Joyce:** There are many studies that show that they cause a variety of changes to normal fertility, which have the potential to interfere with a person’s life after conception takes place. For instance, they cause changes to a woman’s endometrial lining that can prevent the implantation of an embryo without the mother even knowing. Many of the people we know were conceived while their mother was using a hormonal contraceptive, but many more have likely lost their lives after conception.

**Columbia:** What effect has the pill had on marital stability and intimacy?

**Dr. Joyce:** These pills have been shown to be associated with lower intimacy, overall well-being, and spiritual well-being when compared to couples using methods of natural family planning. Some sociological studies have shown that taking contraceptives may affect the way men and women select a partner for courtship. We may look, act and smell differently under the influence of these hormones. These might at first glance seem to be small changes, until

we consider that later when the artificial hormone influence is gone, a person may find himself with someone who doesn't look, act, or smell like she used to. Animal studies indicate that these changes can have dramatic effects on relationships. It is significant that couples using natural family planning methods very rarely divorce.

**Columbia:** Recent studies have shown that oral contraceptives have even affected the environment. Does this mean the pill can have unintended health consequences on the general population?

**Dr. Joyce:** Hormonal contraceptives are removed from the body through the kidneys and make their way into the waste water systems in each community. These contaminate the water since they are not filtered or chemically removed from the water that we drink. The US Fish and Wildlife Department has reported that all areas of the country that have been tested have streams with endocrine disruption (hormone overdose) in fish and amphibians. This syndrome has affected the ability of these populations to reproduce. Although about 10 percent of couples in the United States experience infertility, it has not been established whether this is related to the contraceptive hormones in the water we drink.

**Columbia:** What can Catholics and other people of good will do to counter the negative effects of the pill on health and society?

**Dr. Joyce:** First, find out if your doctor can respect your faith and its precepts. If so, ask to have your fertility respected as an integral part of your body and see if your doctor is one of the 10 percent of doctors who are knowledgeable enough about natural methods of fertility regulation to recommend them to you. Demand that health problems which are related to a woman's cycle be evaluated instead of suppressed with these powerful anti-fertility drugs.

If you or family members are offered these drugs for painful menstrual periods or irregular bleeding, ask about alternatives that do not adversely affect your fertility – such as better diet, appropriate exercise, and simple anti-inflammatory agents. If these problems persist, ask to be evaluated for common conditions and see if there are specific medical or even surgical solutions.

Finally, if you have infertility issues or questions, there are a growing number of centers that offer comprehensive evaluation of fertility and cooperative, ethical treatment of fertility problems with very high success rates. (Visit [fertilitycare.org](http://fertilitycare.org) for more information)

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