

Birth Control Pills, Menopause, and Heart Disease

Does taking birth control pills increase my risk?

Today's low-dose birth control pills generally do not increase the risk of heart disease for most women who have not gone through menopause. However, taking birth control pills may worsen the effects of other risk factors, such as smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol levels, being overweight, and existing medical conditions. If you have any of these risk factors and are currently taking or considering oral contraceptives, you should talk with your physician about whether birth control pills are the best choice for you.

What should I discuss with my physician?

If you are currently taking or considering using oral contraceptives, you should talk with your physician about your birth control options. You will need to discuss any risk factors that may rule out birth control pills as a safe choice for you. You should let your health care provider know if:

- **You Are a Smoker:** If you smoke, you should not use birth control pills. Smoking increases the risks for serious cardiovascular problems associated with taking oral contraceptives. These risks increase with age and the number of cigarettes you smoke per day and are particularly high for women over 35.
- **You Have Diabetes:** Glucose metabolism, or blood sugar, can change dramatically for some women who take birth control pills. If you are diabetic and decide to use oral contraceptives, you will need to have regular blood sugar tests.
- **You Have High Blood Pressure:** Your blood pressure may increase when you start using birth control pills. This increase does not pose a health risk for most women, but you should have your blood pressure tested. If your blood pressure goes above 140/90 mm Hg, speak with your doctor about a different kind of pill or another method of birth control. Once you stop taking the pill, your blood pressure should return to normal within a few months.
- **You Have an Existing Medical Condition:** If you have a heart problem or have suffered a heart attack or stroke, oral contraceptives may not be safe for you. You should discuss your birth control options with your health care provider.

How does menopause impact my risk for heart disease?

As you age, changes in your body will affect its production of the two female hormones, estrogen and progesterone. These hormones are produced in the ovaries and regulate your menstrual cycle. The loss of these hormones after menopause is thought to increase women's risk for heart disease.

Silver Cross Hospital offers a variety of fitness and exercise programs. Visit www.silvercross.org or call 1-888-660-HEAL (4325) for details.



THE WAY YOU SHOULD BE TREATEDSM

A Solucient Top 100 Hospital[®]



Women are considered post-menopausal after they have experienced one full year without menstruation. Menopause may occur naturally, generally between the ages of 45 and 50. Some women may experience menopause at an earlier age following the surgical removal of both ovaries or by entering pre-menopause before the age of 45. Hormonal changes following menopause contribute to women's risk for heart disease as well as other risk factors for heart disease, such as high total or LDL cholesterol levels. These risks increase more slowly in women who experience natural menopause. Women who experience early menopause are twice as likely to develop heart disease as women of the same age who have not gone through menopause.

Does hormone therapy increase or reduce the risk?

In the past, it was thought that replacing the hormones that a woman loses following menopause offered her some protection against heart disease. You may know someone who has been given Hormone Replacement Therapy or HRT.

The most recent findings from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute's Women's Health Initiative indicate that hormone therapy (estrogen and progestin combination) poses more heart disease risks than benefits. Study results indicate an increased risk for heart disease, stroke, and pulmonary embolism (blood clot in lung), as well as breast cancer among women taking hormone therapy. Because of these findings, it is recommended that post-menopausal women should not take hormone therapy to prevent heart disease.

Earlier studies also found that women with heart disease who have gone through menopause have an increased risk of suffering another heart attack after taking hormone therapy, at least in the short term. If you have gone through menopause, you should talk with your physician to decide if beginning or staying on hormone therapy is a good choice for you.

What symptoms should I watch for?

All women who are taking birth control pills for HRT should be aware of symptoms that may indicate a medical problem. If you are experiencing abnormal bleeding, breast lumps, shortness of breath, dizziness, severe headaches, or pain in your calves or chest, you should contact your physician right away.

Take care. Take charge. Take heart.

Heart disease is the #1 killer of women. It is a greater threat than all cancers combined. Since 1984, more women than men have died each year of heart disease.

Silver Cross Hospital's Women's HeartAdvantage™ Program is committed to helping women with heart disease. But while there is much a hospital, its physicians and nurses can do, we can make an even greater difference together with you. Take care of yourselves. Know what your risk is. Know what your health indicators are. And then take charge. Choose to quit smoking, to eat better, to exercise. Choose to improve your health. Because women of America, this is your life. We hope you'll put your life into it.



THE WAY YOU SHOULD BE TREATED™

A Solucient Top 100 Hospital®