

Characteristics of Women Who Experience Mood and Sexual Side Effects With Use of Hormonal Contraception

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Abstract

Objective: To describe the characteristics of women who experience sexual and mood side effects associated with use of hormonal contraception, and to compare them with women who do not.

Methods: We conducted a questionnaire survey of women presenting for primary care or to a reproductive health clinic. The women were asked if they had specific side effects with use of hormonal contraception in the domains of sexual desire, arousability, or irritability. The characteristics of women who reported such symptoms were compared with those who did not.

Results: Of the 1311 women recruited (mean age 28 years), 978 (77%) had previously used hormonal contraception. Of these women, 482 (51%) said they had at least one mood side effect and 358 (38%) said they had at least one sexual side effect. Using logistic regression, we found that women complaining of mood side effects were more likely to be unmarried ($P = 0.02$) and to be Caucasian or South Asian ($P = 0.002$) than women without such complaints. Women complaining of sexual side effects were more likely than those without sexual side effects to be younger ($P = 0.04$), to have more education ($P = 0.04$), and to be Caucasian or South Asian ($P = 0.07$). Women who complained of sexual side effects were also more likely than others to complain of mood and physical side effects ($P < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Understanding the characteristics of women who report mood and sexual side effects with use of hormonal contraception may be useful when counselling women about contraception. It is important for women to choose contraception that not only is effective but also does not complicate their emotional and sexual lives.

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Résumé

Objectif : Décrire les caractéristiques des femmes qui connaissent des effets indésirables liés à la sexualité et à l'humeur en association avec l'utilisation d'une contraception hormonale, et les comparer avec les caractéristiques des femmes qui n'en connaissent pas.

Méthodes : Nous avons mené une enquête par questionnaire auprès de femmes qui cherchaient à obtenir des soins primaires ou qui consultaient une clinique de santé génésique. Nous avons demandé à ces femmes si elles connaissaient, dans le cadre de leur utilisation d'une contraception hormonale, des effets indésirables particuliers en ce qui a trait à la libido, à l'excitabilité ou à l'irritabilité. Les caractéristiques des femmes qui ont signalé de tels symptômes ont été comparées à celles des femmes qui n'en ont pas signalés.

Résultats : Parmi les 1 311 femmes dont la participation a été sollicitée (âge moyen : 28 ans), 978 (77 %) avaient déjà utilisé une contraception hormonale. Parmi ces femmes, 482 (51 %) ont affirmé avoir connu au moins un effet indésirable lié à l'humeur et 358 (38 %) ont affirmé avoir connu au moins un effet indésirable lié à la sexualité. Au moyen d'une régression logistique, nous avons constaté que les femmes ayant connu des effets indésirables liés à l'humeur étaient plus susceptibles de ne pas être mariées ($P = 0,02$) et d'être de race blanche ou sud-asiatique ($P = 0,002$) que les femmes n'ayant pas connu de tels effets. Les femmes ayant connu des effets indésirables liés à la sexualité étaient plus susceptibles d'être plus jeunes ($P = 0,04$), de présenter un niveau de scolarité supérieur ($P = 0,04$) et d'être de race blanche ou sud-asiatique ($P = 0,07$) que les femmes n'ayant pas connu de tels effets. Les femmes ayant connu des effets indésirables liés à la sexualité étaient également plus susceptibles que les autres d'avoir connu des effets indésirables physiques et liés à l'humeur ($P < 0,001$).

Conclusion : La compréhension des caractéristiques des femmes qui signalent des effets indésirables liés à la sexualité et à l'humeur, en association avec l'utilisation d'une contraception hormonale, pourrait s'avérer utile dans le cadre du counseling sur la contraception. Il est important que les femmes puissent choisir une contraception qui est efficace, tout en n'entravant pas leur vie sexuelle et affective.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual and mood side effects may be significant problems for women using hormonal contraception. In the general population of women of reproductive age who have ever used contraception, 29% said they had discontinued oral contraceptives because of dissatisfaction with the method.¹ In the 2002 Canadian Contraception Study, 59% of women had changed their method of contraception, and 20% of these women had switched because of side effects.²

Whether or not mood and sexual side effects of hormonal contraception are important reasons for discontinuation is controversial. A review of studies over 30 years of oral contraceptive side effects concluded that there was no consistent pattern of effect to suggest a hormonal or biological determinant.³ Another review stated that women using oral contraceptives may experience positive, negative, or no effects on libido.⁴ A study of 79 women in stable committed relationships found that only 38% had continued oral contraceptive use one year later; 47% had discontinued, and 14% had switched to another preparation.⁵ Reasons for discontinuation or switching contraceptive methods were assessed using logistic regression. Emotional side effects, worsening of premenstrual syndrome, decreased frequency of sexual thoughts, and decreased psychosexual arousability accounted for 87% of cases. A study comparing side effects and continuation rates of three different hormonal contraceptives found that the crucial points influencing acceptability, compliance, and continuation were poor cycle control and disturbance of coitus due to vaginal dryness and loss of desire.⁶ In a study of 1086 German medical students, hormonal contraception was related to lower sexual functioning scores (as assessed by the Female Sexual Function Index⁷), especially desire and arousal.⁸ A double-blind, placebo-controlled study with 150 women who had been surgically sterilized showed a decrease in sexual desire with use of hormonal contraceptives.⁹

The Physician's Desk Reference, a commonly used drug reference publication in the United States, reports under "full drug label information" for hormonal contraceptives that associated mood changes have been reported and are believed to be drug-related, and that changes in libido have been reported and a causal association has been neither confirmed nor refuted.¹⁰ The Compendium of Pharmaceuticals and Specialties, a commonly used drug reference publication for professionals in Canada, describes an incidence of < 1% for mood and sexual side effects in hormonal contraceptive users.¹¹ An online source of drug information for physicians, *UpToDate*, does

not mention either mood changes or loss of libido in the list of hormonal contraception side effects.¹²

The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics of women who reported mood and/or sexual side effects with previous hormonal contraceptive use. The participants were women presenting for primary care at a number of clinics and doctors' offices and women presenting for insertion of an IUD or pregnancy termination. We wished to compare the characteristics of women who had sexual and mood side effects with use of hormonal contraception with those of women who did not have those side effects.

METHOD

In order to represent a wide range of women, as well as women especially in need of contraception, we recruited women from primary care, including rural and urban offices and a university health clinic, as well as women presenting to an urban abortion and contraception clinic for insertion of an intrauterine device (IUD) or pregnancy termination.

At primary care clinics and private doctors' offices, reception staff or a research assistant in the waiting room gave the questionnaire to any woman who appeared to be between the ages of 15 and 50. At the abortion/contraception clinic, women were given a questionnaire in the waiting room by reception staff, together with the medical questionnaires usually completed by patients arriving for their first appointment. The staff made clear which forms were for the clinic (mandatory) and which were for the study (optional).

Questionnaires were available in English, Chinese, and Punjabi (the three most commonly spoken languages in the area). The questionnaire asked women if they had ever used hormonal contraception and, if so, whether they had ever had physical, sexual, or mood/irritability side effects from using hormonal contraception.

The questionnaire was designed by the investigators to capture specific negative effects of hormone use on mood and sexual experience; the questions on sexual side effects were adapted from the Sexual Interest and Desire Inventory–Female¹³ and the questions on mood were adapted from the Irritability Questionnaire.¹⁴ The questionnaire was pilot tested with 10 patients who complained of sexual and/or mood side effects from hormonal contraception, and was subsequently further refined. The questions related to mood and sexual side effects are shown in Table 1.

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