

Hormonal Contraception and Potential HIV Risks



Frequently Asked Questions
and Counselling Messages

Introduction

Recent studies have shown that there may be an association between certain hormonal contraception methods and increased risk for HIV, specifically for women who use Depo-Provera. While some studies have found this increased risk, others have found none, leaving uncertainty around whether or not family planning methods that contain hormones increase a woman's risk.

This booklet will address some of the questions that you as a provider may have in regard to associations between hormonal contraception and HIV and will provide you with some basic messages to support FP counselling.

Hormonal Contraception Methods

What family planning methods are considered hormonal contraception?

Hormonal methods come in a variety of forms and are called this because the methods contain synthetic estrogen, progesterone or both to mimic the hormones in a woman's body to prevent pregnancy. Hormonal methods include:

- The pill, also called the oral contraceptive pill or combined oral contraceptive

(COC).

- Taken by mouth daily.
- Can contain one hormone or two.
- Pills containing two hormones are called combined oral contraceptives or COC.
- The Injection, or shot.
 - Lasting either one, two or three months.
 - Depo-Provera and NET-EN are the most common.
- An implant in the arm.
 - Lasting 3-5 years depending on the type.
- Hormonal intrauterine contraceptive device, IUCD.
 - Inserted into the uterus.
 - Lasts five years.
- A patch worn on the skin.
 - Changed every week.
- A ring inserted in the vagina.
 - Changed every month

Hormonal contraceptives are extremely effective in preventing unintended pregnancies when used consistently and correctly. However, they do not protect a person from sexually transmitted in-

fections (STIs), including HIV. It is important to also use a male or female condom in combination with a hormonal contraceptive to ensure dual protection from both STIs and pregnancy.

What family planning methods are the non-hormonal methods?

Non-hormonal methods of birth control include those that provide a barrier between the sperm and the egg, these include:

- Male condom;
- Female condom;
- Copper Intrauterine contraceptive device (Cu-IUCD) and
- Diaphragm.

Barrier methods are generally not as effective as long-term or hormonal methods, but when used correctly and consistently their effectiveness can approach that of the pill. Some of the barrier methods protect against STIs, including HIV.

Do hormonal contraceptives protect against STIs, including HIV?

- No. Hormonal contraceptives do not protect against any STIs, including HIV. Currently there are no family planning methods, except for condoms (male and female), that protect against HIV and STIs.

- Women using hormonal contraceptives must also use a condom to protect themselves against HIV and other STIs.
- Women who use hormonal contraceptives should be counselled to use condoms consistently and correctly with each sexual act if they are not in a mutually monogamous relationship.

What is dual method use?

- Dual method use is when a person uses both condoms (male or female) and another contraceptive method for dual protection against STI/HIV and pregnancy.
- All women at risk for an STI, including HIV who wish to prevent pregnancy should be counselled on dual method use.

Hormonal Contraception and HIV Acquisition

Recent studies have shown that there may be an association between certain hormonal contraception methods and increased risk for HIV, specifically for women who use Depo-Provera. While some studies have found this increased risk, others have found

none, leaving uncertainty around whether or not family planning methods that contain hormones increase a woman's risk. It is not clear whether the risk is due to the injectable or to the way that the research was conducted.

In 2017 the World Health Organization changed the Medical Eligibility Criteria (MEC) for use of progestogen-only injectables among women at high risk for HIV from a category 1 to a category 2. A MEC category 2 means that women with the condition may generally use the method, but that some follow up and additional counselling may be needed.

Is there an increased risk for HIV acquisition for women taking hormonal contraception?

- Based on the available evidence it is still uncertain. However, it is important that women should be informed of this possible risk and given the opportunity to make a decision for themselves.
- Some studies have shown that there is an increased risk of HIV infection for women taking Depo-Provera, other studies have not found this. A more rigorous, randomized control trial is being conducted to try to acquire more evi-

dence on this issue.

Does possible increased risk of HIV acquisition apply to all hormonal contraception?

This potential risk applies to progestogen-only injectables, including Depo-Provera and Net-En.

- No association has been found for the combined oral contraceptive pill.
- There is not enough evidence currently available on the other hormonal methods.

Should women be advised not to take Depo-Provera?

- NO. WHO approves Depo-Provera use for all women. Women should be counselled on all available family planning methods and supported to make a voluntary choice regarding the method that best fits their situation. If the Depo-Provera injection is the method chosen by the client she should be supported to use it, but should be counselled on possible risks for HIV acquisition. Women at high risk of HIV acquisition considering Depo-Provera should also be informed about and have access to HIV preventive measures including male and female condoms.

Why should we counsel our clients who wish to use Depo Provera about possible increased risks of HIV acquisition?

- It is important to inform women on the effectiveness, duration, risks, benefits and potential side effects of the methods and allow them to make the decision on what method best suits their situation. .
- WHO does not place any restrictions on the use of any type of hormonal contraception at this time.

Hormonal Contraception and HIV Progression

Can women who are HIV positive use hormonal contraception?

- Yes, all women, regardless of their HIV status can use hormonal contraception.

Will hormonal contraception make women's HIV progress faster?

- No, to date there are no indications that taking hormonal contraception will have any effect on the level of HIV in the body.

Do hormonal contraceptives increase the risk of transmitting HIV to partners?

- No, contraceptives does not change the risk level of transmitting HIV to a partner. However, it is important to also use condoms along with hormonal contraception.

Hormonal Contraception and ART interaction

Can women on ART use hormonal contraception?

- Yes, all women can use hormonal contraception, regardless of whether or not they are taking ARVs.
- There are some concerns about the drug interactions between ARVs and hormonal contraception that women should be informed about.
 - o Non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NN-RTIs), particularly Efavirenz and Nevirapine, may reduce the effectiveness of combined oral contraceptives and implants, which can result in method failure and an unintended pregnancy.
 - o The WHO Medical Eligibility Criteria for women using Efavirenz and Nevirapine is a category 2 for contraceptive

implants, Net-En, progestin-only pills, combined oral contraceptives, combined injectables, copper IUD and the hormonal IUD. A MEC category 2 means that women with the condition may generally use the method, but that some follow up and additional counselling may be needed

Will hormonal contraception still work if a woman is also taking ARVs?

- Certain ARVs have been shown to interact with some hormonal contraception and cause the contraception to be ineffective, resulting in unintended pregnancy.
- Efavirenz and Nevirapine specifically may reduce the effectiveness of oral contraceptive pills or implants leading to unintended pregnancy.
- It is important to make sure women are aware of this and should be assisted to choose the right method.

Will a person's ART stop working if she is using hormonal contraception?

- No. Hormonal contraception does not have any effect on how ART works in the body.

What impact do TB drugs have on hormonal contraception?

- Tuberculosis treatment medications also interact with hormonal contraception and may reduce the effectiveness of all hormonal contraception with the exception of Depo-Provera. When TB and HIV drugs are taken together it is possible that hormonal contraceptive effectiveness will be reduced even further.
- Oral contraceptives are a MEC category 3 for women who are using the TB drugs, Rimfampicin or Rifabutin. WHO does not recommend the use of oral contraceptive pills for women using TB treatment, unless there is no other more appropriate method available.

Counselling Women about Hormonal Contraception and HIV

Client-centered counselling, that addresses the specific health and social needs of clients is essential to helping women make informed, voluntary decisions on family planning use. Health Providers should consider the follow-

ing when counselling clients on family planning:

- Ensure that every woman has the opportunity to make voluntary, informed decisions about whether and when she becomes pregnant or whether to use contraception and which method to use.
- Do not restrict the use of any contraceptive method, unless medically indicated by the WHO MEC or national guidelines.
- Always emphasize the importance of using male or female condoms in addition to the hormonal method (dual method use). This maximizes prevention of pregnancy and STIs/HIV. When used consistently and correctly, condoms offer protection from pregnancy if a primary contraceptive method fails.
- Promote informed choice by ensuring that family planning counselling for clients is comprehensive and comprehensible. Counselling should be based on the client's health situation, personal preferences and fertility intentions and should provide them with easily understandable information on method effectiveness, duration, benefits, risks

and side effects as well as follow up and refill requirements.

HC-HIV Counselling Messages for All Women

- Hormonal contraceptives are extremely effective in preventing unintended pregnancies when used consistently and correctly.
- Hormonal contraception will not protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. It is important to also use a male or female condom with hormonal contraceptive to ensure dual protection from both STIs and pregnancy.
- If you are not in a mutually monogamous relationship, it is important to use condoms in addition to hormonal contraception.
- All women regardless of their HIV status can use hormonal contraception.

Counselling Messages For Women Who Are HIV Negative Or Of Unknown HIV Status Who Choose To Use Depo-Provera

- Some studies have shown that there is an increased risk of HIV infection for women using Depo-Provera, other

studies have not found this.

- It is important that you understand this possible risk to help you make the best family planning decision for your situation.
- The World Health Organization approves the use of Depo-Provera for all women, including women at high risk of HIV, but recommends that women who chose Depo-Provera be counselled on the possible increased risk for HIV and ways to prevent HIV transmission.
- You can protect yourself from HIV by using condoms consistently and correctly- in addition to Depo-Provera or another hormonal contraceptive method. You can also protect yourself from HIV by using Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) treatment if that is available to you.
- You can use any method you would like and can still choose to use Depo-Provera if that is the method you prefer.
- There are other effective family planning methods to choose from if you decide that you do not want to start Depo-Provera or if you want to switch to a different method.

Counselling Messages for Women Who Are HIV Positive Who Chose To Use Hormonal Contraception

- All women can use hormonal contraception regardless of whether they are taking ARVs or not.
- There is no indication that using hormonal contraception will make your HIV infection worse.
- Hormonal contraception does not have any effect on how ART works in the body.
- Hormonal contraception does not increase the risk of transmitting HIV to a partner. However, it is important to practice dual method use- hormonal contraception and condoms to prevent transmission of STI's/HIV.
- There are some concerns about the drug interactions between ARVs and hormonal contraception that women should be informed about.
- The World Health Organization approves the use of all hormonal contraception for women on ARVs, but recommends that women who use Efavirenz and Nevirapine and wish to use implants, combined oral contraceptives and progestin-only pills be counselled that the contra-

ceptives may be less effective. This means that if you are taking those ARVs you have a small chance of becoming pregnant even if you are using hormonal contraception

- It is important that you are aware of this possible issue to help you make the best decision for your situation.
 - If you use contraceptive pills, you should try to take your pill at the same time every day. Missing pills may further reduce the effectiveness of that method.
 - To help prevent pregnancy you may wish to use male or female condoms in addition to your hormonal contraceptive method.
 - If you have had sex without using a condom within the last 5 days and are concerned about pregnancy, you may wish to use emergency contraception to minimize your risk for pregnancy.
- You are not restricted from using implants or combined oral contraceptives and can still choose to use it if that is the method you prefer.
 - You may wish to discuss changing your ARV regimen with your HIV provider if you are concerned about possible interactions/decreased effectiveness of your family planning method.
 - Tuberculosis treatment medications also interact with hormonal contraception and may reduce the effectiveness of all hormonal contraception except Depo-Provera. When TB and HIV drugs are taken together it is possible that hormonal contraceptive effectiveness will be reduced even further.
 - WHO does not recommend the use of oral contraceptive pills for women using TB treatment, unless there is no other more appropriate method available.

FURTHER READINGS

For more information on dual protection strategies refer to the 2018 “Family Planning: A Global Handbook for Providers”.

For more information on hormonal contraception-HIV Acquisition refer to the 2017, “WHO Hormonal Contraception Eligibility for Women at High Risk of HIV- Guidance Statement”.

For more information on the MEC refer to the 2015 “WHO Medical Eligibility Criteria Wheel” and WHO Medical Eligibility Criteria for Contraceptive Use”.

For more information on hormonal contraception and ART or TB drug consideration, refer to the 2017 FHI 360 “Contraceptive Method Considerations for Clients with HIV Including Those on ART: Provider Reference Tool”.