



May 26, 2004

**Re: Article clarifies relationship between oral contraception and cervical cancer**

Dear Colleague:

I am writing to bring your attention to an article published in this month's *Contraception* (Oral contraceptives and cervical cancer: a critique of a recent review. *Contraception* 2004; 69:347-51). This article is a comment on an earlier publication by Smith *et al.* (Cervical cancer and use of hormonal contraceptives: a systematic review. *Lancet* 2003; 361: 1159-67.) that concluded that the risk of cervical cancer increases with increasing duration of oral contraceptive (OC) use.

The authors of the article, Kate Miller and Kelly Blanchard (Ibis Reproductive Health) and Paul Blumenthal (Johns Hopkins University), argue that the available evidence does not support the conclusion that longer term OC use increases risk of cervical cancer. They examine the role of potential behavioral confounders and advocate a focus on appropriate strategies for preventing clinically-relevant outcomes, including both invasive cervical cancer *and* unintended pregnancy.

*Controlling for behavioral confounders*

It is possible that use of OCs may be related to increased risk of human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. HPV, a sexually transmitted virus, is known to be a necessary but not sufficient pre-condition for cervical cancer. Compared to those who don't take the pill, women who use OCs may be more sexually active, less apt to use barrier methods, and more frequently screened for cervical cancer. Increased exposure to and screening for cervical cancer over time could lead to higher observed rates among users. Differences in sexual behavior and screening between women who use OCs and women who don't might account for the differences in observed cervical cancer rates.

*Balancing risks and benefits of OC use*

OC use can provide a variety of health benefits. Obviously they help women to avoid unintended pregnancies (and the potential health risks associated with pregnancy and (unsafe) abortion). OCs also have non-contraceptive benefits, including protection against ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer, ectopic pregnancy, colorectal cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, and bone loss. These known health benefits of OCs must be weighed against any possible association with cervical cancer, which, in any event, is preventable with access to a prevention (screening and treatment) program.

We hope you have a chance to read this article and that you find it useful. Please feel free to contact me if you'd like a copy of the article or if you have any questions.

Best,

Katy Backes, MPA  
Project Manager, Ibis Reproductive Health