Breast Cancer and Oral Contraceptives

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October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, a good time to focus on the actual, probable and possible multiple causes behind this U.S. epidemic. Given the recent uproar about the increased cost of contraceptive pills on college campuses, it makes sense to first look at possible links between The Pill and the rising rate of breast cancer in younger women in the U.S.

Fact #1: From 1979 to 1999, the rate of breast cancer for white women under 50, increased by 9.8%; this rate increase for young Black women was even higher, at 26.4%.

Fact #2: At year-end 2003, the rate of breast cancer in older or post menopausal women dropped a huge and historic 14.7% after 35 million American women, stopped filling their HRT (hormone replacement therapy) prescriptions, when the National Women's Health Initiative Study in 2002, reported a 26% increased risk of developing breast cancer from using HRT.

Since HRT and The Pill both do their work by adding hormones to the body, it seems important to take a close look at possible links between breast cancer and current oral contraceptive drugs.

A team of researchers, headed by Chris Kahlenborn, a family practitioner in Harrisburg, PA, recently completed a statistical compilation of all published research, examining possible links between the older generation of oral contraceptives and breast cancer in women less than 50 years old. The numbers extracted from these 1977-1998 studies were not good.

Published in the October 2006 *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, Dr. Kahlenborn found that all women under 50, using the older generation of oral contraceptives, had a 44 % increased risk of developing breast cancer over women who did not use the Pill. This risk was even greater for women who used the Pill for at least four years prior to their first full term pregnancy. This group of mothers showed a 52% increased risk of developing breast cancer. A single study, conducted in Norway and Sweden in 1989, showed that long-time and current users of the Pill, who were currently under 45, had a 144% risk of developing breast cancer, compared with similar women who had never used the Pill.

Unfortunately, the American Cancer Society or ACS, the National Cancer Institute, Komen for the Cure, Avon Foundation and others, have yet to fund research or publish studies that look at possible links between the newer generation drugs such as: Nuva Ring, Ortho Tri-Cyclen Lo, Yasmin or other generic and brand name oral contraceptive drugs with pre-menopausal women who are diagnosed with breast cancer each year.

When is the last time your physician mentioned that women, currently using oral contraceptives, are flying blind since there are no published studies on how current birth control drugs affect one's risk of developing breast cancer? Even drug company brochures cite only 1970 & 1980 era studies when discussing breast cancer risks and current oral contraceptive drugs.

Why is no one publishing studies about the breast cancer risks within this 3 billion dollar U.S. oral contraceptives market? We now have 12 million teenagers, as well as women under 50, using the Pill, many beginning at earlier ages and many remaining on these drugs for longer than ever periods of time.

While people may think of the American Cancer Society as a foremost supporter of research, in 2005 it reported spending less than 10 percent of its nearly billion dollar budget on independent scientific studies, laments Devra Davis, in her new book, ***The Secret History of the War on Cancer***. Davis, Director of the Center For Environmental Oncology at the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, describes in colorful and painful detail, how the ACS, controlled by business interests since 1945, played a leading role in blocking research and overtly misleading the public until the 1970's on the carcinogenic effects of tobacco. Is the ACS now playing this same role with oral contraceptives?

Until we conduct and publish research that examines links between current oral contraceptives and our rising rate of breast cancer in women under fifty, it might be good that the cost of the Pill just tripled on college campuses. In fact, all of a sudden, the IUD option is looking far better and safer.

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