



## Weight Gain, Acne, Fertility: Pros and Cons of the Birth Control Pill

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Last year, we wished the birth control pill a happy 50th birthday. While we've learned a ton since women first started popping the now-ubiquitous BCP, new studies are surfacing all the time suggesting the health benefits and risks of taking it.

Most recently, a study found that taking the pill doesn't pack on the pounds -- a side effect women have bemoaned for decades. The study's subjects were monkeys, so we're taking the results with a grain of salt. But the research did get us curious about the pros and cons of "The Pill."

To separate fact from fiction, we spoke to **Jennifer Mills, MD., an OB/GYN at Touro Infirmary in New Orleans, La.**

### **The Health Benefits**

#### ***Uterine and ovarian cancer***

According to Mills, several studies have shown that women who take birth controls pills for at least five years have a lower risk of uterine and ovarian cancer.

"As far as ovarian cancer, when you're taking in those hormones, your body doesn't have to make those hormones, so your ovaries can be lazy and shut off, which provides less of an opportunity for abnormal cells to grow," she says.

"For uterine cancer, a main risk factor can be anovulation, where the uterine lining and endometrium are being bombarded with one hormone or another, which can set it up for abnormal cell growth. The pill prevents this from happening."

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## ***A lighter, less crampy, less moody flow***

While some people claim that birth control makes them more hormonal, in general, if you shop around and get on the best pill for you, it will level you out.

"When you're not on the pill, your hormones vary widely throughout the month -- your estrogen and progesterone levels fluctuate, causing moodiness," says Mills. "Most of the time birth control can even them out."

## ***Clearer skin***

Acne is often a result of too much testosterone. The pill tends to decrease testosterone levels, helping to reduce breakouts.

## **The Health Risks**

### ***Reduced libido***

"Some women will notice a decrease in their libido," says Mills. "We believe this is linked to lower levels of testosterone." This isn't an issue for everyone who takes birth control, but if you feel less fired up between the sheets, talk to your doctor about switching to a different pill.

### ***Fertility***

"The pill isn't going to cause any problems with infertility even if you are on it for 20 years," says Mills. "When you get off the pill, your body is going to do what your body is going to do."

While that is certainly the case, the pill can mask abnormalities in your cycle, which could tip off a doctor to possible fertility issues, such as a lack of or infrequent ovulation.

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## ***Weight gain***

"When you go on birth control, it can make you a little bloated because you're going to retain some fluid -- maybe two or three pounds of water weight gain," says Mills.

On top of that, for some people, the pill stimulates their appetite, prompting them to eat more food (and, often, junk food).

"In general, I don't see patients gaining more than 5 or 10 pounds," she says. If you feel like you're busting out of your jeans, track your weight for a few weeks, then talk to your doctor about whether the pill might be the cause.

## ***Blood clots***

"Estrogen does thicken your blood to a slight degree and anytime you have extra estrogen, it can make you slightly more likely to form blood clots," Mills says. "But in a young healthy woman, it's not going to cause any significant increase in risk. It's really only an issue if you have an underlying familial issue, such as a blood clotting disorder."

However, if you are a smoker or over 35, your risk is higher, so talk to your doctor about alternative birth control options.

Have you had a good or bad experience with the pill?