

THE BIRTH CONTROL PROJECT: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF WOMEN'S CONTRACEPTION USE AND SEXUAL HEALTH

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For over four decades, researchers and clinicians have known that hormonal contraception, particularly combined hormonal oral contraception, has been linked to sexual side effects such as loss of libido, difficulties becoming aroused, and breast tenderness, however few clinical remedies or recommendations exist for women experiencing these negative sexual impacts. Very little is known about the sexual acceptability of methods besides the pill or male condom. As a result of negative sexual impacts associated with contraceptive use, many women discontinue their method or switch to less effective methods, resulting in a higher risk for unplanned pregnancy.

The Birth Control Project is a longitudinal research effort that aims to better understand the pathways and particular sexual side effects associated with a wide array of hormonal and non-hormonal contraceptive methods currently used by US women. In partnership with 30 reproductive health clinics located in 4 states (MT, NJ, UT, IN), women between the ages of 14 and 45 who were starting a new contraceptive were enrolled into an online study. A total of 587 women completed the baseline survey after starting a new method and were emailed follow-up surveys after 3, 6, and 9 months. Women were asked to report their experiences with side effects, method satisfaction, sexual relationships, sexual function, and their reasons for switching or discontinuing their contraceptive method.

Approximately half of women in the study started a combined hormonal method, one-third used a non-hormonal method, and 17% started a progestin-only method at baseline. To date, approximately half of all participants have completed the study. Of the 1,056 follow-up surveys, 71% indicated method continuation, 16% switched methods, and 13% discontinued contraceptive use. Experiencing too many negative side effects was the main reason for discontinuing contraception, and wanting to use another type of birth control was the most common reason for switching methods at the three-month follow-up.

At the three-month assessment, no significant differences emerged in women's report of the quality of their sex life based on the contraceptive method used. Preliminary findings indicated that 24% women using combined hormonal methods reported an improvement in their sex life compared to 16% of women using either progestin-only or non-hormonal methods; 29% of ring and 23% of pill users reported their sex life got better compared to 12% of IUD users. Wide variation exists in women's reports of how their contraceptive method impacted their sexual lives.