

4 DRUGS AND YOU

PART  ONE

Clear and reliable information on how illegal drugs affect women's health is hard to come by. Findings are often based on inadequate information about the women involved or on animal studies. Drugs can affect appetite, weight and appearance, moods and ability to cope with everyday matters. But this factsheet concentrates on how they affect your monthly cycle, and your chances of protecting yourself from pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Drugs and the monthly cycle

Some women who use drugs find their periods becoming irregular, heavier or lighter – sometimes stopping altogether. In fewer cases, women have experienced spot bleeding after taking the drug.

Why does this happen? Again, there is little information about how drugs affect the hormone system. It is known that heroin has a direct effect on the part of the brain which controls your cycle – which can stop you ovulating and stop your periods. *If your periods stop, that does not necessarily mean you have stopped producing eggs. You can still get pregnant.*

Some drugs affect the cycle because of their other effects on the body. Drugs that dull appetite (such as amphetamines, ecstasy and heroin), that make you more active and lose sleep (such as amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy), or that increase your body temperature (such as ecstasy), can all affect your weight and general health. This in turn can affect your periods and moods. A well-balanced diet, sleeping well and gentle exercise can help.

The pill and other hormonal contraceptives

There is no evidence that illegal drugs stop the pill (or other hormonal contraceptives) working if they are taken as intended. However, street drugs may be mixed with substances which could have an effect – no one really knows. Also, serious liver disease (which may be associated with alcohol or drug use) can interfere with hormonal contraceptives. No hormonal method protects you from HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The pill Taking it regularly can be a problem for people with a serious drug or alcohol problem. They may be better off with other methods (such as Depoprovera or Norplant – see below). This applies even more to the 'mini-pill'. The mini-pill contains only progesterone (rather than progesterone plus oestrogen, as in the more usual 'combined' pill) and has to be taken every day at the same time.

Drugs may make you or your partner more likely to want sex but less likely to use contraceptives. Heroin and other drugs that cause periods to stop may lead to a false sense of security – the assumption that you cannot get pregnant so don't need to take the pill.

Being sick if you are on the pill can make it ineffective. So can forgetting to take it on time – that means within the 12-hour safety margin for the combined pill and more or less bang on time for the mini-pill. On these occasions you will need to use condoms or some other form of protection.

Smoking while on the combined pill has been discouraged for some time as it increases the risk of heart disease.

Depoprovera and Norplant Highly effective contraceptives based on progesterone. Once in place, neither requires the woman to do anything nor cooperation from a sexual partner. Should be considered when taking the pill every day may be unrealistic.

Depoprovera is given by injection every three to four months. It often causes menstrual flows to be lighter or to stop altogether – a harmless side-effect which some women appreciate. It has been linked with irregular bleeding after delivery of a baby. However, this is usually light, will stop, and should not give cause for alarm.

Norplant is placed under the skin of the arm. Protection from pregnancy lasts five years, during which time it can be reversed if the woman wants to have a baby. New and needs special training to apply so not available from all GPs and family planning clinics. Less interference with menstrual cycle than with Depoprovera.

Non-hormonal contraceptives

The coil/IUD Anyone who is sexually active could be at risk of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). If you have a coil, you are at greater risk of PID. Women with HIV infection are generally advised not to use the coil/IUD. It may also make painful periods worse. Otherwise, it is safe and effective, requiring no cooperation from sexual partners. No protection from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The 'cap'/diaphragm Needs an initial fitting by a trained doctor or nurse and to be used every time. It should always be used with a spermicidal cream. Rapid weight loss (perhaps due to drug use) can mean the cap no longer fits properly, making it less likely to protect you fully from pregnancy. The spermicidal cream offers slight protection from HIV (see below).

Sheath/condom The best protection from HIV infection though far from foolproof. On its own not a reliable form of contraception. Requires cooperation from your sexual partner and care to avoid it splitting.

The female condom Has great potential because it gives women control in protecting themselves and their sexual partners from HIV and other STDs, as well as pregnancy. Free at family planning clinics which stock it. Elsewhere it costs £3.95 for 3.

However, studies differ on how acceptable it is to women. Some of the problems reported include it splitting, slipping out of the vagina, being accidentally pushed in, or the penis accidentally entering the vagina outside the condom. Women have objected to discomfort caused by it rubbing during intercourse, and to the rustling and noisiness of the product and its cold feel.

Spermicides These come in lots of different forms – pessaries, creams, sponges, etc – for use on their own or with caps and condoms. Spermicide (nonoxinol) is thought to be an extra barrier against HIV. It can cause side-effects with high levels of use.

Sponges are particularly popular because so easy to use. They are easy to insert and pull out, require no cooperation from sexual partners, and protection from pregnancy lasts 24 hours. Because of the spermicide they also provide some protection from HIV, but nowhere near as effectively as condoms.