

# Contraception and Cancer

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Ever since the first marketing of the combined oral contraceptive pill 45 years ago, there have been warnings from some scientists, clinicians, feminists and the media that the pill “may cause cancer”. Since then, a vast amount of epidemiological research has failed to provide convincing proof that the pill may be associated with significant risks of any major cancer. On the other hand, very strong and consistent evidence has been brought forward to demonstrate a dramatic protective effect of combined oral contraceptive use (increasing with duration of pill use) on the later development of endometrial and ovarian cancer. These are two of the commonest cancers in women in modern ‘developed’ society.

Controversy has long surrounded the relationship between oral contraceptive use and both breast and cervical cancer, however recent evidence appears to exonerate the pill from impacting on breast cancer risk. The issue of cervical cancer risk is still unresolved, because it is so difficult to completely control for the influence of sexually transmitted pathogens. The pill may still be a weak co-factor in the genesis of this cancer. Similarly, the pill may contribute to a small increase in the risk of liver cancer, although this is difficult to separate from hepatitis-related risks. Data on the relationship between other contraceptives and cancer are much more limited, but do not give cause for any concern.

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