Birth Control Pills for Men are Here. What Does that Mean for Reproductive Health?

Effective male birth control might finally be on its way, as scientists from the University of Washington Medical Center and the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance, CA prepare to present their experimental oral contraceptive at the Endocrine Society's 100th meeting in Chicago. The pill, called dimethandrolone undecanoate or DMAU, contains an androgen like testosterone, a progestin and a long-chain fatty acid (undecanoate) that keeps the birth control from clearing the body too quickly. This last component appears to be key to this new contraceptive offering, according to the study's senior investigator, Stephanie Page, M.D., Ph.D., professor of medicine at the University of Washington.

> *DMAU is a major step forward in the development of a once-daily 'male pill'…Many men say they would prefer a daily pill as a reversible contraceptive, rather than long-acting injections or topical gels, which are also in development."*

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Mild Repercussions?

The sample size for this study was small, with a total of 83 men completing the study. At the highest dose of the contraceptive, participants had significantly lower levels of testosterone and two of the hormones required for sperm production. Previous male birth control efforts showed liver inflammation, but this new effort passed all kidney and liver safety tests.

Or Serious Side Effects?

The pill didn’t result in any liver damage, but all groups taking part in the trial reported weight gain and decreases in HDL (“good”) cholesterol levels. Researchers classified these issues as mild, but these side effects may indicate that men with lower testosterone experience a lower level of health.

In a recent study of over 5,000 Italian men, scientists found that men with lower sperm count were 20 percent more likely to have higher blood pressure, bad cholesterol, and weigh more. The lower sperms levels went hand in hand with decreased testosterone, leaving many men at increased risk for diabetes, heart disease, stroke and decrease muscle and bone health. Dr. Alberto Ferlin, the leader of this study and a professor of endocrinology at the University of Bresci, said, “Infertile men are likely to have important co-existing health problems or risk factors that can impair quality of life and shorten their lives.”

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Spreading the Discomfort Around

The side effects of this pill don’t appear to be serious, but a universally reported weight gain and increased bad cholesterol is the precursor to more serious health issues later in life. But it remains to be seen if men will be interested in managing their reproductive functions with a daily pill, especially one where it must be taken with food to be effective.

I’m not saying that women need to continue taking on the majority of the faux hormone contraceptive responsibilities…in fact, why hasn’t this happened sooner!! But there are still serious health issues stemming from that that we have yet to

properly address in modern medicine. Are we adding on to that dog pile? Then again, by the year 2050, giving birth will likely be an extremely dicey proposition due to antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Sources

- *Dimethandrolone undecanoate shows promise as a male birth control pill* – Endocrine Society
- *Early Study of Male Birth Control Pill Finds it's Safe and Effective* – US News
- *Men with low sperm counts at increased risk of illness, study suggests* – BBC