

ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES AND ACNE

Many women develop complexion problems as an adult, even women who had mild or no problems with acne during their adolescent years. Although no one is sure of the cause, these outbreaks may be related to normal hormone fluctuations. You may have noticed that your breakouts tend to occur at certain stages of your menstrual cycle.

Acne occurs when oil glands in the skin become clogged. The oil is created by glands at the base of each pore. Normally, the oil travels up through the pore and out onto the surface of your skin. However, if too much oil is produced, it can cause the cells that line the pore to make a plug at the skin's surface. Certain normal hormones called androgens produced by your body can cause these glands to produce excess oil.

Oral contraceptives (birth control pills) contain two female sex hormones, estrogen and progestin. The combination of these hormones prevents ovulation (the release of eggs from the ovaries), alters the lining of the uterus and helps prevent sperm from getting through the cervix into the uterus. Oral contraceptives help acne by increasing a protein called sex hormone binding globulin (SHBG). This binds androgens so that they are not active, which decreases the amount of oil produced by glands in the skin.

Ortho-Tricyclen and Estrostep are brands that the FDA has approved for use in treating acne, although all estrogen-containing oral contraceptives are effective in decreasing the level of active androgens.

Yaz and Yasmin are oral contraceptives that contain a progestin called drospirenone. In addition to decreasing the levels of androgens, Yaz and Yasmin can block the action of remaining androgens where they work in the skin. By blocking these androgens these two oral contraceptives are even more effective for acne. For treatment of acne, I feel these are the two best birth control pills.

Oral contraceptives can have side effects. Mild side effects such as breast tenderness, irregular bleeding, bloating and nausea usually subside after the first month or two. Serious side effects such as blood clots and strokes are less common now that lower doses of estrogen are used in oral contraceptives. To avoid these serious side effects, women with high blood pressure, a history of blood clots, or migraine with aura should not use oral contraceptives. In addition if you smoke or are over 35 it is best not to take birth control pills. Yasmin should not be used if you have kidney, liver or adrenal disease because it may increase potassium levels. If you are pregnant, or trying to become pregnant, you should not take oral contraceptives for your acne. Oral contraceptives also have positive side effects, including a reduced risk of ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer and osteoporosis. Many women also have lighter, more regular periods.

It is important to take your oral contraceptive at the same time every day. This is easier if you make taking the pill part of your morning or bedtime routine. If you forget a pill, take it as soon as you remember.

Patients can expect to see improvement in their skin about three months after beginning to take an oral contraceptive. This improvement may be slower than you think. You should continue to use any topical treatments I have prescribed for you.

If you have any questions, please ask me before you leave the office.