

HEALTH

No Weight Gain with Birth Control Study casts doubt on common belief

The commonly held belief that oral contraceptives cause weight gain appears to be false, according to research conducted at the Oregon National Primate Research Center at Oregon Health & Science University.

Weight gain is one of the main reasons why women may avoid or discontinue birth control, which in turn places them at greater risk for an unplanned pregnancy.

To conduct their research, scientists and physicians studied a group of rhesus macaque monkeys for almost a year. The species were used because their reproductive system is nearly identical to humans. However, unlike human studies, more variables can be controlled and measured — such as exact food intake — to provide more meaningful data.

At the beginning of the study, half the animals were obese and half were normal weight. During the eight-month treatment period, animals received doses of oral contraceptives, adjusted to the weight of the animals so that it mimicked dosage in humans.

Researchers tracked weight, food intake, activity levels, body fat and lean muscle mass. At the study's conclusion, the normal weight group remained weight stable whereas the obese group lost a significant amount of weight (8.5 percent) and percent of body fat (12 percent) due to an increase in basal metabolic rate. No changes were seen in food intake, activity or lean muscle mass for either group.

"This study suggests that worries about weight gain with pill use appear to be based more on fiction than on fact," said Judy Cameron, senior author of the paper and a researcher at the primate center.

"We realize that research in nonhuman primates cannot entirely dismiss the connection between contraceptives and weight gain in humans, but it strongly suggests that women should not be as worried as they previously were," Cameron said.

For Your Health

BY DR. RICHARD N. WALDMAN



Back pain during pregnancy is one of the most common discomforts that pregnant women experience. Many factors contribute to pregnancy-related back problems. A growing belly, extra weight and changes in hormones are all major culprits.

As a pregnancy progresses, the uterus becomes heavier, changing your center of gravity. This may cause you to lean backward in the later months of pregnancy, a posture that puts much more stress on the muscles of your back.

Additionally, the abdominal muscles that usually support the

spine stretch to accommodate the fetus and may become weak, causing the back to work harder. Pregnancy hormones also relax ligaments in the weight-bearing joints of the pelvis in preparation for delivery. While it allows the joints to become more flexible, it can make back pain worse.

Paying special attention to how you sit, stand, and move may help ease back pain. Try these tips:

Sit in chairs with good back support, or use a small pillow behind your lower back.

Wear low-heeled (but not flat) shoes with sufficient arch support. Walking or athletic shoes are a good option. Avoid high

Back Pain during Pregnancy

heels—they tilt your body forward and can strain the back.

Try not to stand for long periods of time. If you can't avoid it, rest one foot on a stool or box to take the pressure off your back.

Ask for help when lifting heavy packages. If you must lift something on your own, remember to squat down while bending at the knees, and stand up with a straight back.

If your bed is too soft, placing a board between the mattress and box spring may help. Also, try to sleep on your side with one or two pillows between your legs for support.

Talk to your doctor about support devices such as a maternity girdle, elastic sling, or back brace. Or check maternity stores and catalogs for abdominal support

garments or maternity pants with a wide elastic band that fits under the curve of your belly to help support its weight.

Soothe back pain by applying a heat pad on the lowest setting, a warm water bottle, or a cold compress.

If your back pain is severe or lasts for more than two weeks, tell your doctor. It may be a signal of other problems, such as preterm labor.

For more information and to find exercises to strengthen the back, the patient education pamphlet "Easing Back Pain during Pregnancy" is available at acog.org/publications.

Dr. Richard N. Waldman is president of the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

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