



Successful Oral Contraceptive Use

Emerging Trends

Andrew M. Kaunitz, MD

The United States continues to have one of the highest rates of unintended pregnancy among the industrialized nations. Unintended pregnancy is associated with significant medical and economic consequences, including increased maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.

A CALL TO ACTION

Although oral contraceptives (OCs) remain the most commonly used method of effective, reversible birth control, many women are not using them correctly or consistently. A majority of women discontinue OC use within the first year, citing side effects such as breakthrough bleeding as the primary reason. In addition, a lack of patient understanding regarding the use, safety, and benefits of OCs may contribute to their improper use or even discontinuation. Many women and some clinicians are unaware that OCs confer numerous, well-documented noncontraceptive health benefits. These include increased cycle regularity, decreased

menstrual cramps, prevention of endometrial and ovarian cancer, and acne treatment. In addition, prevention of osteoporosis, treatment of dysfunctional uterine bleeding and perimenopausal vasomotor symptoms, and protection against colorectal cancer are emerging as additional OC noncontraceptive benefits.

OC EVOLUTION

The recent reductions in estrogen dose have led to a decreased incidence of estrogen-related side effects but have been associated with an increased incidence of breakthrough bleeding and, in many cases, poor cycle control. Innovative formulations combining 25 mg EE with the proven progestins norgestimate and desogestrel aim to balance the lowest effective hormonal doses with excellent cycle control and tolerability. In addition, an OC formulated with the new progestin drospirenone has recently become available. Clinical trial data indicate that this formulation is effective and provides good cycle control. Experience with this prog-

estin, however, is limited; also, specific package labeling restrictions apply and long-term effects are unknown.

CLINICAL INTERVENTION

By developing communication strategies, clinicians can build better rapport with and trust from patients. In addition, practitioners need to address the numerous barriers that prevent successful OC use. By addressing their patients' fears and misperceptions regarding OCs, reviewing benefits as well as potential side effects, eliminating unnecessary medical rituals, and selecting an OC formulation with a favorable tolerability profile, clinicians can improve their patients' success with OCs.

Andrew M. Kaunitz, MD, is professor and assistant chair, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Florida Health Science Center, Jacksonville.