



Oral Contraceptives And Atherosclerosis

by Sue Purvis, R.Ph.

European researchers report that the millions of women worldwide who are on the pill or who have used oral contraceptives for a year or more in the past are at increased risk of plaque buildup in their arteries. A study of 1,301 Belgian women aged 35-55 concluded that each 10 year use of oral contraceptives was associated with a 42% increase risk of bilateral carotid (neck artery) plaque. There was also a 34% increase risk of femoral (leg artery) plaque. Ernst Rietzschel, MD, of Ghent University in Ghent, Belgium noted that women who are taking oral contraceptives, particularly smokers, are known to be at increased risk of blood clots, but that's a short-term risk that dissipates once they go off the pill. In contrast, plaque deposits that raise the risk of heart attacks, stroke, and peripheral artery disease continue to build up for decades after a woman stops taking the pill. Critics of the findings note that this is only one report and that some of the women in the study used OCP containing higher doses of hormones than are most commonly used today. However, women (especially those at risk for heart disease) and their physicians may wish to consider this information and the benefit-to-risk ratio when selecting the best form of contraception for a given individual.

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