

SIDE EFFECTS: GASTRO INTESTINAL SYSTEM

Nausea, Vomiting, and Epigastric Discomfort. A certain proportion of women complained of symptoms resembling the epigastric discomfort, nausea, and occasional vomiting noted in early pregnancy. However, there seems to be no correlation with the history of hyperemesis in previous pregnancies. Usually these symptoms do not persist beyond the first or second cycle. If they do, there may be a resultant loss of appetite and weight. Forty-three percent of all users in our series have complained of these symptoms at one time or another; 10.9 percent of all users withdrew because of the persistence or severity of these side effects.

Weight Change was noted by 36 percent of users: 20 percent reported gain and 16 percent loss. However, the symptom was not sufficient to lead anyone to discontinue for this reason alone. Four patients out of 838 have noted weight gain to the extent that they have requested some regime to reduce. Many patients have noted improved appetite after the initial month or two. Puerto Rican women in general prefer to be fatter than their sisters in the North.

SIDE EFFECTS: NERVOUS SYSTEM—SKIN

Headaches, Dizziness and Nervousness. Thirty-five percent of all users have complained of these symptoms. Three and three-tenths percent discontinued norethynodrel for these side effects. Often the menstrual and premenstrual headache may be relieved by diuretics.

Skin Changes. Chloasma or increase in skin pigmentation of the face is a characteristic finding in pregnancy among many Puerto Rican women. Five of our patients discontinued the medication for this reason (0.6 percent of users) and 9 others who are still active users have noted marked changes. About one-third of the women have remarked on some pigmentation. Acne has not been observed in our patients.

DISCUSSION

At the beginning of our study, we were as uncertain of the outcome as our patients. We could not answer with assurance their questions as to whether the "pill" would give 100 percent protection or might result in permanent sterility or whether children born subsequently would be affected adversely. There were undoubtedly several reasons for the higher incidence of unpleasant side effects in the earlier cases. In the first place, we were asking leading questions to try to elicit all possible reactions. Secondly, we were using a higher dosage of steroid than was subsequently found to be necessary. In the second year of our study, there was much adverse press and television publicity related to any type of family planning procedure. However, the fact that a year and a half later this became an issue in the political campaign seemed to have little effect since by that time our patients themselves were our most enthusiastic supporters. Now almost everyone who comes for family planning advice comes asking for the pills. The pill is especially acceptable because of its ease of use. This appeals to poor families who live in crowded conditions with absence of sanitary facilities. Of our 838 women of all economic and educational levels, it was necessary to advise change of method in only 6 instances because the patient could not follow instructions.

SUMMARY

Norethynodrel, with a seventieth to a twenty-fifth of its weight of ethynyl estradiol-3-methyl ether, was given in 20 daily doses, from the fifth to the twenty-fourth day of each menstrual cycle, to 838 women of proven fertility. Doses of 10 mg. were later reduced to 5 mg, and subsequently to 2.5 mg. During medication periods of 1 to 54 months and a total of 15,150 cycles in 1,165 woman years of experience, there were no pregnancies among those who carried out the instructions. Thirteen pregnancies were due to incorrect use.

Unpleasant side effects—headaches, nausea, epigastric discomfort, scanty menstruation, etc.—were reported by 43 percent of all users. These usually diminished after the early months. Side effects were named among the reasons for discontinuance by 139, and as the sole reason by 121 women. Reasons connected with the medication led to its discontinuance by 147, one for each 8 woman years of use.