Pause in Use of COVID-19 Vaccine Sparks Talk of Medical Sexism

Women ask, “If birth control pills are more likely to cause blood clots than the vaccine, why aren’t experts equally concerned?”

June 9, 2021 By Caroline Tien

The decision by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to temporarily pause use of the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) COVID-19 vaccine in mid-April indirectly incited a debate about sexism in medicine and health care. In the wake of the announcement, women voiced concerns about medical double standards in connection with birth control pills, according to The New York Times.

The FDA and the CDC recommended a pause in administration of the vaccine on April 13 and lifted it on April 23, after conducting what the agencies characterized in a press release as a “thorough safety review.” The agencies based their initial decision on the fact that as of April 12, six U.S. women between ages 18 and 48 were diagnosed with blood clots after vaccination. While the odds of any one person developing the condition were minuscule (for context, more than 6.8 million doses had been administered by that date), many prospective recipients became wary nonetheless.

In an attempt to reassure the public, according to the Times, many scientists noted that most commercial birth control pill brands are far more likely to cause clots than the J&J vaccine.

But instead of allaying fears, their statements stoked anger.

One in 1,000 women on birth control can expect to develop a clot. In contrast, at the time of the J&J vaccine’s safety review, less than one in 1 million recipients of J&J’s vaccine experienced this issue, according to ABC 11. Despite the fact that use of the pill is a statistically greater risk factor for blood clots, many observed that these medications never prompted nearly as much panic.

Women took to Twitter and other social media platforms to stress the difference in health officials’ response to the two drugs. Some regarded the disparity as proof that public health officials address potential safety issues of medications only when they also threaten men.

In an interview with the Times, Eve Feinberg, MD, a reproductive endocrinologist and infertility specialist at Northwestern University, agreed with the women. “They should be angry—women’s

health just does not get equal attention," she said. "There's a huge sex bias in all of medicine."

However, the newspaper also noted that the clots linked to the J&J vaccine were located in the brain. These formations are rarer and more severe than the clots associated with birth control pills, which usually develop in the legs or lungs.

While for many women, the benefits of birth control outweigh the risks, these medications can trigger various side effects, such as weight gain and an increased risk for depression and emotional instability, according to Brown University.

For more on the FDA and CDC's decision to lift the pause and begin readministration of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, read "U.S. Resumes Use of Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine." Also, for more on the increased blot clot risk associated with birth control pills, read "New Versions of Birth Control Pills May Double Blood Clot Risk."

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