Time Out

Hormonal contraceptives can limit the number of periods you have.

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What do a beach-bound woman and a woman prone to severe cramps have in common? Well, odds are neither one wants the inconvenience, or pain, of a monthly period. But these ladies aren't alone; many women use hormonal contraceptives to manipulate how often they get their cycle.

Here's how it's done. Those who take a 28-day birth control pill pack can skip the tablets with inactive ingredients and start a new pack after 21 days. This strategy can enable a woman to skip her period for several months, until she takes inactive tablets for one week. If a woman uses an extended-cycle method of birth control, such as Seasonale, she'd take active pills for 12 weeks, followed by one week of taking inactive pills. The result? A total of only four periods each year.

But is this safe? David Grimes, MD, a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology and a fellow at the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at the University of North Carolina, believes there's no reason for women to have monthly periods. Grimes says women who lived in the hunter-gatherer era did not have regular periods, so women having such frequent menstrual cycles is a relatively new and unnatural phenomenon.

Susan Rako, MD, a leading expert in the field of women's health, takes a different view of women manipulating their menses with hormonal contraceptives. In the long run, for healthy women to do this, she warns, may be more harmful than helpful. "We won't know all the risks until menstrual suppression goes on for 20 more years," Rako says.

In the meantime, the Food and Drug Administration and the National Women's Health Network have approved some existing products and methods women can use to alter the frequency of their menstrual cycles.

If you're interested, talk with a trusted health care provider to see whether this is a good choice for you.

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