Should Women With Mental Illness Avoid Using Birth Control?

Hormonal contraceptives, such as the pill, IUDs and vaginal rings, don't cause depression in women with anxiety disorders.

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Here's some good news for women suffering from mental health issues who may be concerned that the hormones in birth control can precipitate depression and suicide: Contraceptives are safe to use, according to new findings published in the American Journal of Psychiatry.

In fact, researchers at Northwestern Medicine debunked the myth that hormonal contraceptives, such as the pill, intrauterine devices (IUDs) and vaginal rings, can trigger depression and suicide in women.

For the investigation, scientists conducted a comprehensive review of published research on contraceptives for women with psychiatric disorders. The goal of researchers was to provide guidance for these women when they were well enough to manage their mental and reproductive health and plan for pregnancy. (Mental illness is highest in women during their prime reproductive period, from age 18 to 25.)

According to Katherine Wisner, MD, chief of general obstetrics and gynecology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and the corresponding author of the review, a review of the literature showed that hormonal contraceptives don't cause depression.

"Women should know they always have access to many types of birth control, regardless of their history or likelihood of mental illness," Wisner said. "They shouldn't feel like they're out there flailing on how to not get pregnant."

However, there is an association between depression and contraceptive use, which is why researchers pursued the inquiry. But association is not the same as cause and isn't found in all studies, noted Jessica Kiley, MD, the chief of general obstetrics and gynecology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and the study's senior author.

In addition, some studies and clinical trials show that birth control can help to stabilize or reduce the rates of mood symptoms in women living with psychiatric disorders.

Researchers advised gynecologists and psychiatrists to work together to help women make the

best birth control choices for themselves. The authors also said psychiatrists should receive training to help them talk to patients about their fertility and family planning.

“Contraceptive care should be considered preventative health so women can make active and deliberate decisions about timing of pregnancies,” Kiley suggested.

Additionally, Wisner cited the recommendation by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists that women be screened for depression at routine appointments and advised women to broach the topic of contraception and family planning with any of their care providers, including psychiatrists.

For related coverage, read “7 of the Most Popular and Effective Birth Control Options” and “Male Birth Control Update.”

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