

The Health Case against Unnatural Birth Control

By John Kippley | May 23, 2008

There are many good reasons not to use unnatural forms of birth control, and this column will focus on some of the health reasons. Such reasons are so strong, however, that once they are seen they can overshadow the primary, religious reason to eschew contraceptive behavior. The “problem” with health reasons is that some folks will argue almost forever that such and such a study is not definitive, etc. And sometimes a particular health problem may be solved. Thus I want to briefly review again the ever-abiding religious reason against contraception.

The primary reason not to use unnatural forms of birth control is that using them is contrary to God’s law for love, sex, and marriage. Why is it wrong? The famous 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* calls the use of such measures “intrinsically dishonest” (no. 14). And why is contraceptive behavior dishonest? There are different explanations. My preference is to focus on the marriage covenant because that is something the couple themselves freely entered. At marriage, they made a commitment to give themselves to each other for better and for worse until death. Their individual marriage acts ought to reflect that commitment; such acts ought to renew, at least implicitly, their marriage covenant, for better and for worse. But the body language of contraceptive behavior says loudly and clearly: “We take each other for better but definitely and positively *not* for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy.”

Such behavior contradicts the marriage covenant; it pretends to be a renewal of the marriage covenant, but it is not. Therefore it is intrinsically dishonest and immoral. That having been said, we can look at some of the health-based reasons not to use unnatural forms of birth control.

The Pill and breast cancer. There is convincing evidence that the Pill increases a woman’s risk of breast cancer, especially if she uses it before her first full-term pregnancy (FFTP). Dr. Chris Kahlenborn, a specialist in internal medicine, has researched this extensively. In his book, *Breast Cancer: Its Link to Abortion and the Birth Control Pill*, he states two different levels of risk. The first is “ever-use”; the second is “use for 4 or more years”:

- (1) “If a woman takes the oral contraceptive pill [OCP] before her FFTP [first full-term pregnancy], she suffers a 40% increased risk of developing breast cancer compared to women who do not take OCPs” (p. 36).
- (2) Commenting on a 1990 study that reviewed other studies done in the 1980s, he states, “The study showed that women under the age of 45 who had taken OCPs for 4 or more years prior to their FFTP had a 72% increased incidence of breast cancer” (p. 34).

You may have seen references to an epidemic increase in the rate of breast cancer in younger women, but it’s very possible that the worst is yet to come.

In studies done in the 80s, women under the age of 45 typically did not take the Pill for long periods of time before their FFTP. Now, however, it is not unusual for girls to start on the Pill in their teenage years and to stay on the Pill for years. “Treatment of acne” is sometimes given as the reason for teenage use of the Pill. Whether that is just an excuse for being sexually active or not is something I cannot judge. The important point I want to make is that regardless of the reason for which it is taken, the Pill increases a girl’s risk of later developing breast cancer. It is bad medicine for any girl to take the Pill. Further, “breast cancer is the worldwide leading cancer in women and is the most common cause of cancer death in U.S. women age 20-59” (Kahlenborn brochure, “Breast Cancer Risk from the Pill”).

While increased risk of breast cancer is the scariest health reason to avoid the Pill, it is by no means the only one. There’s a whole litany of side effects that are listed in the Pill literature, sometimes more frank in what is oriented to physicians instead of patients. Blood clots, high blood pressure, cervical cancer, liver tumors, headaches, migraines, mental depression, and the list goes on.

Other methods. The other forms of hormonal birth control—implants such as Norplant and the injection (Depo-Provera)—have equally adverse effects and may be even worse.

Tubal ligation has its own set of problems sometimes referred to as post-tubal-ligation-syndrome including an increased rate of hysterectomy to attempt to alleviate symptoms associated with tubal ligation.

Vasectomy has its problems, too. In 1993 the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published two studies that showed a huge increase in prostate cancer in men who had vasectomies, ranging from 170% to 530 percent. Prostate cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among American men. The problem is that in about 50% of men, vasectomy affects their immune system and so they are more at risk for certain types of diseases. Thus prostate cancer is not the only health reason to avoid vasectomy.

With such strong reasons of both faith and science for not using unnatural forms of birth control, why do the overwhelming number of our fellow citizens and churchmen use them? Part of the contraceptive revolution may be due to ignorance and misinformation fostered by ecclesiastical dissenters. For others, it’s a strong example of how passion clouds reason. I suggest that the use of sex for whatever purposes in whatever relationships has become an idol in Western culture. I also suggest that Romans 1 applies to much more than homosexual sodomy.