On and off the pill ? cancer? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have been on the pill for over a year now. Recently, I broke up with my boyfriend of two years. We still see each other, but I have not had sex since we broke up. I don't plan on having sex with anybody else. My question is, if I don't plan on having sex for a long while, should I stop the pill? I am afraid that if I decide to get back on the pill, I will have an increased risk of cancer or something like that. Is this true?

Please tell me.

?Feeling asexual

Answer

Dear Feeling asexual,

The decision to start, stop, or continue taking the birth control pill is personal. But with all of the mixed scientific evidence concerning possible links between cancer and the pill, what's a girl to do? One thing's for sure ? the link between birth control pills and certain forms of cancer is still unclear.

Some evidence suggests that using birth control pills may increase the risk of cancers of the cervix and liver but reduce the risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer. The amount of time that a woman uses the birth control pill may affect development of certain cancers while protecting against others. For example, the risk of developing cervical cancer may be increased for women who used birth control pills for five or more years ? and yet, long-term use of birth control may protect against endometrial cancer. Confusing! If you'd like more information about birth control, as well as suggestions for alternative birth control options, check out How do birth control pills work? [2] in the Go Ask Alice! sexual health archives.

In terms of whether stopping and then starting the pill increases a woman's cancer risk, there is no evidence to suggest that the stop-start factor alone would increase the risk of developing cancer. Keep in mind that cancer development also depends on a variety of risk factors, including family history and environmental factors. You may want to discuss your concerns with a health care provider, who can assess your individual risk of cancer and also suggest alternative forms of birth control with which you may feel more comfortable.

You may also want to consider discussing other forms of birth control with your ex or any
sexual partner(s). Whether you decide to continue on the birth control pill or choose another option entirely, keep in mind that being comfortable with your birth control choice will help ensure a safe and pleasurable sexual experience.

Alice!
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