Can oral contraceptives cause an abortion? [1]

Dear Alice,

Can a woman abort the fetus if she continues to take the pill?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The short answer to your question: No. Continuing to take the birth control pill before or after a pregnancy is confirmed will not abort the fetus. Oral contraceptives don't cause miscarriages because they do not have any effect on a fertilized embryo. Birth control pills, generally made of estrogen and progestin (synthetic progesterone), essentially prevent pregnancy by inhibiting ovulation and/or causing the cervical mucus to thicken. It is also unlikely that taking the pill will have any effect on fetal development.

However, if a woman using progestin-only oral contraceptives continues with her pill pack while pregnant, she can increase the chance of having an ectopic pregnancy. This is when the fertilized egg begins to develop outside of the uterus, often in the fallopian tubes. Ectopic pregnancies are dangerous and can be life threatening, so they need to be resolved quickly and appropriately. Women experiencing an ectopic pregnancy may have sharp stabbing pains, cramps, or a dull headache that can become severe, while others may experience significant blood loss and go into shock if a fallopian tube bursts. These symptoms must be reported to a health care provider immediately.

On the other hand, specific medications, but not birth control pills, can end a pregnancy. In the United States, mifepristone [2], blocks the hormones that are needed to maintain a pregnancy. As a result, taking the mifepristone pill induces an abortion. This type of abortion, also known as a medical abortion, is an alternative to having a surgical abortion and can only be done up to a certain point in pregnancy. Methotrexate is another drug that stops a pregnancy from further development.

If you are a pregnant woman looking for options, it is best to speak with your health care provider or OB/GYN.

Alice!

Category:
Sexual & Reproductive Health [3]
Contraception [4]
Related questions

Antibiotics and hormonal birth control effectiveness
The abortion pill (mifepristone)
How do birth control pills work?

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUMC)
Published date:
Nov 16, 2001
Last reviewed on:
Sep 13, 2012

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.
If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/can-oral-contraceptives-cause-abortion

Links
5. https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/birth-control-pills
7. https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/pregnancy