Do Over-the-counter Oral Contraceptive Users Skip Reproductive Health Screenings?

Volume 23, Number 2, February 2013

“No,” say Lister Hill scholar Kari White and colleagues. “The prevalence of screening was close to 90% for Pap smear, pelvic exam and clinical breast exam and more than 70% for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among a cohort of U.S.-resident women that were recruited for this study. In addition, more than 90% of these women also reported recent cervical cancer screening which is higher than the U.S. national average of about 85% for women aged 21–49 years.”

A growing body of evidence suggests that over-the-counter (OTC) access to oral contraceptives (OCs) is safe, effective, and may be preferable to some women. In 2004, a national telephone survey found that 68% of women would obtain OCs, the patch or vaginal ring at a pharmacy if they were available without a prescription, and 41% of nonusers said they would start one of these methods. One concern about making OCs available OTC is that women would not obtain recommended preventive screening for cervical and breast cancer and for STIs. No prior research has examined whether women obtaining OCs OTC have similar rates of reproductive health preventive screening compared to women obtaining OCs by prescription.

The researchers took advantage of a natural experiment that exists along the U.S.–Mexico border, where women can buy OCs OTC in Mexican pharmacies for as little as $5 per pack. Two cohorts of women were recruited to complete a series of four interviews. One group included 516 women who had received their last pill pack from a family planning clinic in Texas and the other group included 502 women who had received their last pill pack OTC in Mexico. As would be expected, clinic users were found to have higher use of preventive screenings but the magnitude of the difference was small.

“Overall, our results are encouraging that women would continue to obtain necessary preventive screening if OCs were available OTC in the U.S.,” say the researchers. “A policy shift that allowed access to OCs through an OTC option could expand access to an effective contraceptive method, potentially reducing unintended pregnancies, while at the same time not having a detrimental effect on the uptake of reproductive health screening.”

Contraception, Vol. 86, No. 4, October 2012, pp. 376–382

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