

Contraception may change how happy women are with their husbands

December 3 2014, by Kathleen Haughney



Credit: George Hodan/public domain

(Medical Xpress)—Choosing a partner while on the pill may affect a woman's marital satisfaction, according to a new study from Florida State University and Southern Methodist University.

In fact, the pill may be altering how attractive a woman finds a man.

In a new study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers examined 118 newlywed couples for up to four years. The women were regularly surveyed with questions asking them about their level of satisfaction with the relationship and their use of contraceptives.

The results showed that women who were using hormonal contraceptives when they met their husband experienced a drop in marital satisfaction after they discontinued a hormone-based birth control. But, what's interesting is how the change in their satisfaction related to their husbands' facial attractiveness.

Women who stopped taking a hormonal contraceptive and became less satisfied with their marriage tended to have husbands who were judged as less attractive. The women who were more satisfied after stopping contraceptive use had husbands who were judged as good looking.

"Our study demonstrated that women's hormonal contraceptive use interacted with their husbands' facial attractiveness to predict their marital satisfaction," said SMU psychologist Andrea L. Meltzer, a co-author on the study.

Specifically, women who met their relatively more attractive husbands while using hormonal contraceptives experienced a boost in marital satisfaction when they discontinued using those contraceptives, said Meltzer, an assistant professor in the SMU Department of Psychology.

In contrast, women who met their relatively less attractive husbands while using hormonal contraceptives experienced a decline in [marital satisfaction](#) when they discontinued using those contraceptives, she said.

Hormonal processes may be at work, said Michelle Russell, a doctoral candidate at Florida State and lead author on the study.

"Many forms of hormonal contraception weaken the hormonal processes that are associated with preferences for facial attractiveness," Russell said. "Accordingly, women who begin their relationship while using hormonal contraceptives and then stop may begin to prioritize cues of their [husbands'](#) genetic fitness, such as his [facial attractiveness](#), more than when they were taking hormonal contraceptives. In other words, a partner's attractiveness plays a stronger role in women's satisfaction when they discontinue hormonal contraceptives."

In contrast, beginning a hormonal contraceptive after marriage did not appear to have negative or positive impacts on a woman's satisfaction, regardless of her husband's looks.

In the United States, 17 percent of women ages 17 to 44 were on [birth control](#) pills in 2010, according to the Guttmacher Institute. Nearly 5 percent more used other [hormonal contraception](#) methods such as injections or a vaginal ring.

Psychology Professor James McNulty, who is Russell's adviser and one of her co-authors, noted that it is important to understand that this is only one factor affecting satisfaction.

"The research provides some additional information regarding the potential influences of hormonal contraceptives on relationships, but it is too early to give any practical recommendations regarding [women's](#) family planning decisions."

More information: "The association between discontinuing hormonal contraceptives and wives' marital satisfaction depends on husbands' facial attractiveness." *PNAS* 2014 111 (48) 17081-17086; published ahead of print November 17, 2014, [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1414784111](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1414784111)

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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