Oregon 1st to cover 12 months of birth control at a time

June 12 2015, bySheila V Kumar

It's a like ritual for women across the nation: frequent treks to the pharmacist to refill birth control prescriptions.

It's a hassle for busy students, a headache for rural women with long drives and a cause for panic for travelers on the road when their packs run out.

Soon, however, women in Oregon will be able to avoid such problems, since the state has enacted a first-of-its-kind insurance law that will allow them to obtain a year's worth of [birth control](#) at a time, instead of the 30- or 90- day supply available now.

Gov. Kate Brown signed the legislation Thursday, saying it "has a simple premise that I whole-heartedly believe in: increase access and decrease barriers."

Supporters say the measure will reduce unintended pregnancies and make things easier for women, since they won't need to visit pharmacies as often.

The plan passed the Legislature easily and is part of a push from Democrats and Republicans alike to expand access to birth control in the state. Oregon legislators also are considering a widely supported proposal that would allow pharmacists to write birth control prescriptions for women who pass a self-administered risk-screening assessment.

The Catholic church opposes contraceptive expansion, saying Oregon's measures could have "moral implications and social consequences."

Critics of the new law, meanwhile, say it could increase health care costs for employers and insurers. It could be wasteful to dispense a year's worth of pills, for example, since a woman could decide to stop taking them or choose to switch prescriptions, they say.

"To me it's just a checkbook issue, plain and simple," Rep. Julie Parrish, a West Linn Republican, who opposed the measure.

Mary Nolan, interim executive director of Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon, however, said the benefits of the plan "are so obvious once you point them out. People had been accustomed to going along with 30 days for so long that people hadn't really questioned it."

She said the proposal has drawn interest from lawmakers in California, New York and Washington state. A similar measure is pending in Washington, D.C., reproductive rights expert Elizabeth Nash said.

Insurance companies typically cover a 30- or 90-day supply of contraception, Nash said. But a year's supply "would reduce the potential for skipping pills or not having her patch or ring when she needs it," the Guttmacher Institute researcher said.

The plan would require women to first get a three-month supply to make sure there are no adverse reactions. Subsequent prescriptions could be filled for a year at a time.

It goes into effect Jan. 1.

Oregon's moves to expand access to contraception stand in contrast to efforts elsewhere.

Some more conservative states have focused on allowing pharmacists to opt out of dispensing contraception if they have religious objections. And a recently passed Missouri law would have required insurers to issue policies that don't cover birth control if individuals or employers said contraceptives violate their moral or religious beliefs. A federal judge, however, struck that down last year as unconstitutional.

Nolan said Oregon has traditionally been a champion for women's rights, citing a 1969 move to decriminalize abortion that came several years before Roe v. Wade.

"We have a long history," she said, "of really strong advocates for health care for women—and particularly around reproductive health care."