



Transcript from *Contraception 101: More than Just Pills and Condoms*
Capitol Hill Briefing | December 10, 2008

Part 2: The Pill

Eve Espey, MD [*Faculty, OBGYN, University of New Mexico*]: What we're here to talk about is the mix of contraceptives that are used in this country today and when people think about birth control—and I ask a patient uh, “Do you use birth control?”

They...they automatically assume that I'm talking about the pill. Uh, the pill is the uh, most commonly-used method of contraception uh, in this country. It was uh, developed in the 1960's and it really revolutionized the way uh, American women and women across the world were able to use contraception. The standard method is a, it's called a “Twenty-one/Seven.” So there are twenty-one days of active pills and then seven days of placebo pills. Uh, there's a period—uh, a woman has a period on that regular regimen uh, every month. One of the problems with...with this regimen is that most insurance companies only allow one month at a time to be dispensed. So if you have a three-day window where you can get your next pack of pills and you're on vacation or you, you know, you forgot until it's too late, the...the pharmacy's not open, that presents real problems with being able to comply, to...to be able to take that, the regimen appropriately. There are some new methods and I'm gonna talk about those. Now interestingly when I was reviewing these methods uh, all of them have been licensed or

approved by the FDA since 2000. So there, we really do have a lot of new...a...a lot of new methods available, but the fact that there are so many methods really speaks to the fact that there's no perfect method. If there were a perfect, reversible method then that's what people would use and that would be the end of the story, but there's not. There are new extended dosing regimens. Uh, the trade names are Seasonelle and Seasonique. These are uh, extended pill regimens where there are eighty-four active pills and then either seven or four days of placebo. So when you get a pack of Seasonelle, you get three months' worth of pills and the way those work is that you the, since the placebo pills aren't until the end of that three months of active pills, you don't have a period except for every season. So you have your winter period and your fall period and your spring period. Uh, those...those methods do have some irregular bleeding up front uh, but usually over time women only experience bleeding uh, during those, that...that every three-month uh...uh, time period when uh, the placebo pills are being taken. There are generics uh, for Seasonelle. They're called, "Quasents" and "Jolessa." Uh, they are really very similar to the standard birth control pill in terms of side effects uh, and health benefits. The uh, the final type of pill, the new pill is called, "Librelle," and that is a, just twenty-eight days of a, of active pills. So there's no placebo. So if you took those, if you took a, continuously took Librelle, a pack every month, you would never have a period. So the, having a period is just an, sort of an artifact of the way the pill was developed. You don't have to have a period. You can take pills continuously. Uh, Librelle has some of the same problems that the standard pills have and that is that you only get one...one month at a time. So one of the major benefits of the extended dose, Seasonelle and Seasonique regimens, is that when you go to the pharmacy, you get three months of pills

and it turns out that that will probably help women be more compliant 'cause they don't run into those problems of running out of pills at the end of the month and having to get a new pack. So what...what are the health benefits of birth control pills? People have negative feelings about birth control pills, but it's important to know that there are very few women for whom pills are not safe and effective. Uh, there are a few medical conditions that some women have that make them not good candidates for pills, but...but actually very few. The health benefits are that women on pills tend to have a very regular cycle. They can predict when they are going to have bleeding. They tend to have a much lighter period so not as many days of bleeding. Uh, the bleeding is not as heavy. Uh, and they tend to have less cramping. So women that have bad cramping, miss school or work uh, we often put those women on birth control pills even if they don't need contraception just because of those benefits of a regular light cycle. Two major benefits of birth control pills—and this...this covers all the extended dose regimens as well—uh, are uh, a reduction in uterine and ovarian cancer. These...these are really uh, underappreciated benefits of pills; that women who take birth control pills long-term...long-term have a much lower risk of ovarian cancer and uterine cancer than non-users and finally, less acne. And, of course, when I talk to patients—you know, the younger ones I talk to about acne and the older ones I talk to about cancer, you know, they're...they're uh, everybody's got their benefit. Uh, in terms of side effects, the most common side effects are what...what we as...as medical practitioners call nuisance side effects. Uh, they're hormonal side effects like bloating, headache uh, breast tenderness, nausea and they tend to go away after a month or so of...of pill usage. Some woman are plagued by those longer term uh, but those are the major reasons that women stop birth control pills; that

and just the fact that as it turns out human behavior is such that it is very difficult to take a pill every day. Uh, and that's one of the biggest problems with the pill and some of these other methods that I'm going to talk about that require an active motivation every day, every week, even every month. It's just too often for—I'm gonna say women because that's who uses these—but really for all uh, individuals to...to...to take pills on a regular basis turns out we're not very good at that. So the biggest problem with all these is...is adherence, is being able to take that pill every day uh, and the problem that you can quit without doing anything. We would prefer a method where you have to do something in order to quit, because then you're more likely to be able to get on another method if you want to continue to uh, prevent pregnancy. So we say that the perfect use, if women used pills perfectly, that the failure rate would be less than one percent, but I never even use that number when I counsel uh, patients because the real number is eight percent and, of course, there's a huge range because it's so dependent on...on whether you take that pill or not. Some women are gonna have an eight percent failure rate. Some women are gonna have a fifty percent failure rate. It all depends on your ability to remember to take the pill and then to be able to get the pill, to afford it uh, to get to the pharmacy to actually take it. How much do they cost? Uh, generic pills are uh, you can get them now for as ch...as cheap as eight dollars. There are several pharmacies that have an eight-dollar program. That's been extremely helpful for my patients and the, two fifty dollars for a brand-name drug. And the, you know, what's the biggest birth control pill that's...that's uh, used today? It's...it's "Yaz," because it's very heavily marketed. That's a fifty-dollar-a-month pill. Uh, so there's a big range in price.