



POSITION STATEMENT

Birth Control Pills and Other Hormonal Contraception

The terms *family planning*, *birth control*, and *contraception* have been applied to a broad range of techniques and technologies that are intended to allow sexually active people to control when — or if — they will have children. Focus on the Family acknowledges that there is a broad range of viewpoints within the Christian community regarding the moral and spiritual implications not only of many methods of family planning, but also of birth control in general. In this position statement, we will not attempt to address the breadth of those issues, but rather we will look at questions that have been raised specifically about the mechanism of birth control pills and other forms of hormonal contraception. In so doing, we will seek to distinguish between issues on which Focus on the Family has taken clear positions, and others where it acknowledges honest differences of opinion among people who are committed to a biblical worldview.

Any discussion about family planning requires that we keep in mind three of Focus on the Family's guiding principles:

We believe that the institution of marriage is a sacred covenant designed by God to model the love of Christ for His people and to serve both the public and private good as the basic building block of human civilization. Marriage is intended by God to be a thriving, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman, enduring through trials, sickness, financial crises and emotional stresses. Therefore, Christians are called to defend and protect God's marriage design and to minister in Christ's name to those who suffer the consequences of its brokenness.

We believe that children are a heritage from God and a blessing from His hand. Parents are therefore accountable to Him for raising, shaping, and preparing them for a life of service to His Kingdom and to humanity.

We believe that human life is created by God in His image. It is of inestimable worth and significance in all its dimensions, including the preborn, the aged, those deemed unattractive, the physically or mentally challenged, and every other condition in which humanness is expressed, from the single cell stage of development to natural death. Christians are therefore called to defend, protect, and value all human life.¹

¹ http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/guiding-principles.aspx

These guiding principles have a number of important implications as we consider any birth control method:

- Focus on the Family not only upholds marriage as a God-ordained permanent relationship between a man and a woman, but also maintains that marriage is intended to be the context for the expression of human sexuality.
- When discussing birth control, we must keep firmly in mind the fact that children are indeed a blessing from God.
- Because human life is of inestimable value from fertilization, we must be aware — and in some cases beware — of the mechanism(s) by which a particular birth control method works, or is thought to work.

In light of these guiding principles, Focus on the Family opposes the use of any form of birth control that acts *after* fertilization — and thus ends a new human life — whether by preventing its implantation in the womb or terminating its life at some point after implantation. (Such effects are referred to as *abortifacient*.) For example, the intrauterine device (or IUD) is thought to work not only by preventing sperm from gaining access to eggs, but also by interfering with implantation of a fertilized egg. For this reason Focus on the Family does not support the use of the IUD as a method of family planning.

Hormonal contraceptives — most commonly used in oral forms known as birth control pills or simply as “the pill” — have been a focus of controversy for a number of years because of concerns that they may occasionally contribute to the loss of human life after fertilization. This is a complex matter, not only because it involves multiple biological mechanisms, but also because there are many different formulations of hormonal contraceptives.

At present, it appears that birth control pills containing only progesterone do not reliably prevent ovulation. A similar mechanism of action *may* be at work in the implantable contraceptive Nexplanon, a device implanted under the skin that slowly releases progesterone for up to three years. Furthermore, research indicates that pregnancies that might occur while a woman is using one of these medications have a greater chance of being ectopic — that is, located outside of the uterus. This suggests that progesterone-only contraceptives are more likely to disrupt the normal implantation of an early pregnancy, rather than merely preventing fertilization, and thus are problematic for those who believe that life begins at fertilization.

The most commonly prescribed birth control pills contain both estrogen and progesterone, and are thus known as “combined” oral contraceptives. These, as well as the NuvaRing and Depo-Provera², appear to work primarily by suppressing ovulation. They also cause the mucus at the opening of the uterus to be thickened and, therefore, less likely to be penetrated by sperm. If combined oral contraceptives, NuvaRing and Depo-Provera work only through these mechanisms, they are functioning as true contraceptives, preventing the union of sperm and egg. However, there is controversy as to whether they also bring about changes (primarily

² NuvaRing is a combination contraceptive in the form of a flexible ring that is inserted vaginally once monthly. Depo-Provera, an injection given every three months, actually contains only progesterone, but in a high dose that is highly effective at preventing ovulation.

within the uterus) that could increase the likelihood of losing a fertilized egg if ovulation and fertilization should occur.

Pro-life physicians who have carefully and conscientiously studied this issue have come to different conclusions regarding the interpretation and implications of the relevant scientific data. Some have concluded that combined contraceptives and Depo-Provera may have an abortifacient effect at least some of the time, and have raised concerns about their use, even if this is a rare occurrence. Others are convinced that the available research supports a conclusion that these medications do not have an abortifacient effect.

Focus on the Family's Physicians Resource Council (PRC), a panel of doctors representing a broad range of specialties that advises the ministry regarding medical concerns, reviewed this question at length in the late 1990s. After extended deliberation and prayer in multiple meetings over a two-year period, the PRC could not reach a consensus as to whether these medications might contribute to the loss of human life after fertilization. In 2011 the PRC revisited and reviewed this issue. Physicians who are familiar with the relevant studies, and who hold differing opinions regarding their interpretation, agreed that no new research has been carried out over the last decade that would decisively resolve this issue.

Focus on the Family respects the integrity and pro-life convictions of those who hold differing opinions regarding the mechanism and use of combined hormonal contraceptives, and asks the pro-life community at large to do likewise. In addition, the ministry recognizes that scientific reasoning is not the only factor that may influence one's viewpoint regarding the use of contraceptives. Couples who are considering whether or not to use any method of family planning would be wise to review relevant resources and to discuss their questions, concerns and — most importantly — their options with their physician. (Needless to say, couples with pro-life convictions would be wise to seek input from health care professionals who share their viewpoint.) They should also prayerfully consider whether they are comfortable utilizing a particular contraceptive method when there are varying opinions in the pro-life medical community regarding its mechanism of action.