Unscheduled bleeding in combined oral contraceptive users: focus on extended-cycle and continuous-use regimens

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Abstract

Combined oral contraceptives (COCs) are highly effective when correctly used but unscheduled bleeding, which occurs fairly commonly during the early months, is disruptive for many women. The mechanisms underlying this bleeding are not fully understood. Several studies have shown that extended-cycle or continuous-use COCs are typically associated with higher initial rates of unscheduled bleeding than are conventional 21-day cyclical COCs. Some medicines, herbal supplements and smoking may increase unscheduled bleeding by interfering with estrogen metabolism. The most common cause of unscheduled bleeding is non-adherence to a prescribed COC regimen. Compliance can be improved by appropriate counselling of women about the possibility of unscheduled bleeding and the importance of adherence to the pill regimen. If abnormal bleeding persists beyond 3–4 months and causes such as incorrect usage can be ruled out, other causes should be considered.

Keywords: combined oral contraceptives, continuous-use COCs, extended-cycle COCs, unscheduled bleeding

Introduction

Combined oral contraceptives (COCs) provide excellent contraceptive efficacy and also give many women improved cycle control, reduced cycle-related pain, and reduced volume of menstrual loss.1,2 Unscheduled bleeding requiring sanitary protection is a common side effect of COCs. Such bleeding occurs most commonly during the first 3 months of COC use3 but it may persist and continue to be disruptive and troublesome for many women.

There is increasing interest in the potential health and lifestyle benefits of extended-cycle or continuous-use COCs.4 Although these COC regimens are associated with higher initial rates of unscheduled bleeding compared with conventional 21-day cyclical COCs,5 for many women the benefits of reducing or even eliminating monthly bleeding may outweigh the inconvenience of such unscheduled bleeding. This review describes the occurrence, causes and management of unscheduled bleeding associated with COCs, particularly with regard to extended-cycle or continuous-use preparations.

Methods

Relevant articles were obtained through a PubMed search of the literature. Key search terms included “unscheduled bleeding” and “breakthrough bleeding” in combination with “combined oral contraceptive” or “combined oral contraception”.

Assessment of bleeding patterns

There is lack of uniformity in the analysis and reporting of bleeding patterns. Recognising this, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued recommendations in 1986 for the standardised collection, analysis and reporting of bleeding associated with contraceptive use in clinical studies. The WHO recommended the use of “reference periods” rather than cycles because of the variability in the length of menstrual cycles both within and between individual women. It was therefore proposed that bleeding outcomes be measured using reference periods of at least 90 days.6,7 Recently, Mishell and colleagues8 published new recommendations for the standardisation of data collection and analysis of bleeding in studies of hormonal contraception.

How prevalent is unscheduled bleeding and what causes it?

In studies of inadvertent pregnancies in COC users, the proportion of women who experienced unscheduled bleeding ranged from 16% to 21%.9,10 A recent literature review suggested that irregular bleeding is most common during the first cycle of COC use and that this decreases with longer-term use and strict compliance. The number of bleeding/spotting days for all COCs ranged between 10 and 24 days for the first 90-day reference period but decreased to between 7.5 and 15 days by reference period 4.11

For women from many different cultures, regular patterns of vaginal bleeding are central to beliefs concerning fertility, absence of pregnancy and reproductive health. For some women, the presence of irregular or unpredictable bleeding is a barrier to social, sexual and cultural activities.
and hence represents a major disruption to their lives. In some societies due to social traditions there may be restriction of social, religious or domestic activities during the days of bleeding. Unscheduled bleeding with COCs may be sufficiently troublesome to lead some women to discontinue their use. In a study of 1657 women starting or restarting COCs in the USA, 12% of subsequent discontinuations were attributed to bleeding irregularities.12

COCs comprise an estrogen component [typically ethinylestradiol (EE)] and a progestogen component. The trend in COC formulations has been towards lower doses of both sex steroids, but lower doses of estrogen may be insufficient to sustain endometrial support, leading to unscheduled bleeding.13 In a study comparing COCs containing the same amount of progestogen with two different doses of EE, the formulation containing less EE was associated with a higher incidence of unscheduled bleeding.14 However, progestogen-induced decidualisation and endometrial atrophy may also contribute to the problem.3

Do variations in COC formulation or regimen affect the occurrence of unscheduled bleeding?

In addition to the dose of sex steroid hormones, the formulation and regimen of COCs may affect the incidence of unscheduled bleeding. In a study that compared two COCs that contained 20 μg EE and 100 μg levonorgestrel (LNG) or 500 μg norethisterone, the frequency of unscheduled bleeding was significantly less with LNG.15 There is also evidence that the ratio of estrogen to progestogen may affect the incidence of unscheduled bleeding.16

Prescribing schedules may also be important. Extended-cycle or continuous-use COCs are typically associated with higher initial rates of unscheduled bleeding than are conventional 21-day cyclical COCs.2 One study randomised women (n = 682) to receive a COC containing 150 μg LNG and 30 μg EE according to an extended-cycle regimen (84 days of active pills followed by a 7-day hormone-free interval) or a conventional cyclical regimen (21 days of active pills followed by a 7-day hormone-free interval) over 1 year.5 Women on the extended-cycle regimen reported a mean 37.6 (11% of 336 possible days) unscheduled bleeding/spotting days vs 18.3 (7% of 273 possible days) for women on the conventional cyclical regimen. In a separate study, 708 women were treated with a 91-day extended-cycle COC (150 μg LNG/30 μg EE).17 Each cycle consisted of 84 days of active pills followed by 10 mg EE daily for 7 days. The mean number of unscheduled bleeding/spotting days was highest during cycle 1 (14.3) and generally subsided over time (9.5, 7.2, and 7.6 days for cycles 2, 3, and 4, respectively). A large Phase III trial (n = 2134) evaluated the safety and efficacy of cycle-free LNG/EE (90 μg/20 μg), a continuous-use COC in clinical development for daily use without a hormone-free interval.18 It has recently been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and is currently being evaluated by the European Medicines Agency. Over the 1-year trial (13 pill packs), the number of bleeding and spotting days per pill pack declined progressively; by pill pack 6 and 13, the incidence of bleeding was 33.8% and 21%, respectively. In a separate trial (n = 641) conducted over 12 months, women were randomised to receive 13 packs of cycle-free LNG/EE or a 21-day cyclical COC (LNG 100 μg/EE 20 μg).19 Among the women who received cycle-free LNG/EE, the percentage who experienced unscheduled bleeding decreased with each pill pack (50% at pill pack 3 vs 21% at pill pack 13). After pill pack 4, the median number of days of unscheduled bleeding and/or spotting was lower with cycle-free LNG/EE than with the cyclical preparation.

How do concomitant medications and smoking affect the occurrence of unscheduled bleeding?

Medicines and herbal supplements that induce the cytochrome P450 enzyme system may affect the metabolism of COCs, reducing their efficacy and increasing the risk of unscheduled bleeding. These concomitant medications may include the antituberculosis agent rifampicin,20 antiretrovirals and St John’s Wort.21 A comprehensive review of the literature on drug interactions between COCs and antibiotics identified case reports suggesting a relationship between use of griseofulvin and the occurrence of oligomenorrhea, irregular menses, and unplanned pregnancy.20

Smoking may increase the incidence of unscheduled bleeding by altering estrogen metabolism and consequently diminishing endometrial support.22 In a study that evaluated data from three trials (n = 2956) for six consecutive menstrual cycles, a significantly higher proportion of smokers reported unscheduled bleeding during each cycle (p ≤ 0.039).23 Smokers were 47% more likely to have unscheduled bleeding than non-smokers, with higher levels of smoking associated with a greater frequency of unscheduled bleeding.22

Women generally admit to missing pills in far fewer self-reported cycles than if the pill-taking is objectively recorded. Potter et al.25 compared self-reported data on pill-taking with data from an electronic device measuring compliance. In 3 months of pill use, the electronic and self-reported data agreed on the number of days when pills were missed in only 45% of cases; the level of agreement dropped from 55% in the first month to 38% in the third month. In each month, the proportion of women reporting no missed pills was much higher than the proportion recorded electronically (53–59% compared with 19–33%), and the proportion missing at least three pills according to the electronic data was triple that derived from the women’s reports (30–51% vs 10–14%). In addition, the electronic data recorded substantially more episodes in which women missed pills on two or more consecutive days (88 vs 30). This study very clearly showed that ‘compliance’ was much worse than the individual women were prepared to admit.25

In a study of 943 women in the USA, those who reported unscheduled bleeding or spotting were 1.6 to 1.7 times more likely to have missed two or more pills per cycle than those who did not.26 In a study of 6676 women in Denmark, France, Italy, Portugal and the UK that examined adherence behaviour among OC users, 19% of the subjects stated that they generally miss one or more pills per cycle and 10% miss two or more.27 Moreover, women who did not have an established pill-taking routine were over three times more likely to miss pills compared...
Unscheduled bleeding in COC users

How important is proper patient counselling in managing unscheduled bleeding?
Correct COC use is influenced by the occurrence of side effects, the pill-taking routine, and whether a woman has read and/or understood relevant package information. Those women who are aware of the possibility of unscheduled bleeding before beginning a new COC prescription are more likely to tolerate short-term changes to their bleeding profile. However, side effects with COC use are mild and are less important reasons for discontinuation than is widely believed.

The best way to ensure that women receive appropriate information about bleeding irregularities with COCs is proper patient counselling, particularly with regard to the importance of adherence to a prescribed pill regimen (Figure 1). This may minimise the risk of missed pills and the occurrence of unscheduled bleeding. Unfortunately, many women do not receive adequate counselling. Rosenberg et al.27 reported that nearly 50% of women said that they did not receive appropriate information from their health care provider when their COC was first prescribed. These women were approximately 1.5 times more likely to be inconsistent COC users than those who were satisfied with the counselling they received. A survey of knowledge about COCs in 649 women waiting at pharmacies to receive new prescriptions for COCs indicated that a significant proportion of the women had not been counselled about common side effects of COCs.31 For instance, 65.5% and 46.1% of women had not been counselled about unscheduled bleeding and missed pills, respectively. Those who had been counselled had higher levels of understanding about COCs. There may also be disparities between the information that physicians believe patients report and what patients actually report.

How should providers counsel patients regarding unscheduled bleeding, particularly with regard to extended-cycle and continuous-use COCs?
Patient counselling should include information about the potential for unscheduled bleeding, a clear explanation of how to take the COC, information about the possible consequences of missed or delayed pills, and the benefits of a pill-taking routine. Providers should stress the likely transient nature of unscheduled bleeding and encourage questions, particularly for those women who are first-time COC users or who have not used COCs recently. Although unscheduled bleeding during the first 3–4 months of cyclical COC use is common, extended-cycle or continuous-use COCs may be associated with a longer duration of unscheduled bleeding as well as higher rates in the initial months of use.33 Women considering extended-cycle or continuous-use COCs should be counselled about the need to weigh the convenience of no (or fewer) planned bleeds against the inconvenience of increased unscheduled bleeding. The benefit of a pill-taking routine should be emphasised.

Are there any clinical strategies to manage unscheduled bleeding with extended-cycle and continuous-use COCs?
Currently, there is little evidence from well-designed, randomised studies on clinical strategies for the management of unscheduled bleeding associated with extended-cycle and continuous-use COCs. However, a recent prospective study assessed the occurrence and management of unscheduled bleeding during continuous use of a COC (drospirenone 3 mg/EE 30 µg) over 168 days.35 Instituting a 3-day hormone-free interval was more effective in resolving unscheduled bleeding/spotting than was continuing active pills (p<0.0001).

What should be done for prolonged unscheduled bleeding?
If unscheduled bleeding on COCs persists beyond 3–4 months and causes such as incorrect usage can be ruled out, pathological or physiological causes should be considered. In women with persistent unscheduled bleeding or spotting on a COC and in whom pathological causes have been excluded, we usually recommend changing to another COC. Those women who had been counselled had higher levels of understanding about COCs. There may also be disparities between the information that physicians believe they are providing about COCs and what patients report that they have been told. Written information may be useful in this regard.

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Providing clear and appropriately targeted educational materials regarding the proper use of COCs, particularly written information, is useful and also used by patients. This has a significant impact on raising awareness and increasing contraceptive knowledge34 and many of these resources are available online.

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Figure 1 Proper patient counselling on adherence to a prescribed regimen may help avoid the cycle of unscheduled bleeding associated with oral contraceptives.

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