

## **USE OF HORMONAL CONTRACEPTION IN WOMEN OVER 40 YEARS: IS IT SAFE AND ACCEPTABLE?**

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**Abstract:** As women reach the last decade of their reproductive life, they face competing influences: a natural decline in fertility against more serious consequences of an unintended pregnancy; a need for more than contraception in light of developing medical problems; a greater concern about risks because of increased susceptibility to diseases, as a result of ageing.

The choice has to be informed, weighing a new balance of benefits versus risks in older women. It is thus important to review the evidence on safety, benefits additional to contraception and cancer risks with modern hormonal methods using lower steroid doses. Age alone is associated with an increased relative risk of venous thromboembolism in users but absolute risk remains small. There is strong synergism between age, smoking and hypertension in increasing risk of myocardial infarct/stroke but age alone has only a small or no effect in current and past users. Other benefits of particular importance to older women include improvement of menstrual disturbances, bone density and perimenopausal symptoms. Cancer risk is not increased for breast, increased for cervix and decreased for ovary, uterus and colon-rectum – this is a reassurance to all potential users as cancer is generally an age-related disease. For those apparently healthy older women who have no identifiable risk factors (obesity, smoking, hypertension, diabetes, migraine, predisposition to venous thromboembolism), hormonal contraception with oestrogen/progestogen by whatever route of administration is a safe and reliable option – until age 50. These users will benefit – not only from effective pregnancy protection, menstrual control and relief from perimenopausal symptoms – but also from potential reduction in fractures in the longer term as well as prevention of ovarian, uterine and colon/rectal cancer.