

The pill can kill: AIIMS study

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NEW DELHI: **Women** who take oral contraceptives regularly are at a higher risk of developing **breast cancer** compared to others, shows a study by AIIMS doctors. *Breast cancer risk was found to be 9.5 times more in women with a history of consuming such pills.* Early menstruation cycle, late marriage and lower duration of breastfeeding were the other major factors responsible for the disease among Indians, according to the study published in the latest issue of the Indian Journal of Cancer.

The study was conducted on 640 women, of which 320 were breast cancer patients. "We found long-term use of oral contraceptive pills (OCP) higher among those suffering from breast cancer-11.9%-compared to healthy individuals-1.2%," said Dr Umesh Kapil, a professor at the public health nutrition unit, AIIMS. He said breast cancer is caused by repeated exposure of breast cells to circulating ovarian hormones, and long-term use of OCPs, which contain estrogen and progesterone, may be increasing this risk by causing hormonal imbalance.

The study mostly had women who used **OCPs** for birth control. Emergency contraceptives, popularly called morning-after pills, were not included. Dr Ajeet Singh Bhadoria, a public health specialist and co-author of the study, said that while the use of OCPs for birth control is on the decline, there has been a spike in the use of morning-after pills. "Morning-after pills contain a higher dose of hormones and are meant for emergency. However, many young women use them regularly to prevent pregnancy in case of unprotected sex. Awareness about the side-effects of long-term use is a must" he said.

Most contraceptive pills, including morning-after pills, are available over the counter. According to experts, regular use of such medication must be avoided or taken under strict medical supervision. An AIIMS study on the profile of patients between 2000 and 2011 found that one in 10 women with breast cancer was less than 35 years of age. Of these, about 73% were between 30 and 35, while 24% were as young as 25-29 years. "The relationship between contraceptive use and occurrence of breast cancer is not known. But there is enough evidence to show the hormonal imbalance caused by them, increasing the risk. Early menarche, late marriage and childbirth and abortions are important factors," said Dr G K Rath, the head of Bhim Rao Ambedkar Institute Rotary Cancer Hospital (BRA-IRCH).

Early menstruation cycle, doctors say, results in a substantial cumulative exposure to estrogens and the simultaneous presence of progesterone, which increases breast cancer risk. In Delhi, the incidence of breast cancer is 32 per 100,000 people. Data shows 5-10% patients are between 20 and 30 years of age and a majority are 40-50 years old.

