

Advocates' opinions on moving oral contraceptives over the counter

BACKGROUND

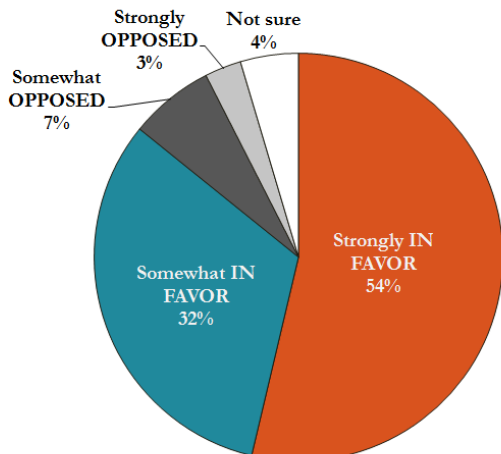
Women who want to use birth control should be able to freely access it, but many struggle with the time or cost associated with a visit to a health care provider to obtain a prescription for a method. Research has demonstrated the safety and effectiveness of over-the-counter (OTC) access to oral contraceptives (OCs), and leading medical groups like the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists support it. Reproductive health advocates will play an important role in an OTC switch for a birth control pill by ensuring women's views—especially those who might benefit most from a switch—are heard. This study aimed to explore advocates' views regarding OTC access to OCs.

We conducted an online survey with reproductive justice and reproductive health advocates on their opinions of current access and barriers to contraception and the potential impacts of an OTC birth control pill for low-income women, young women, and women of color.

FINDINGS

782 respondents completed the survey. Participants discussed current barriers to contraceptive use, including the expense of a provider visit, contraceptive supplies, and travel; stigma; and inadequate health education. Overall, 86% of advocates were strongly or somewhat in favor of the birth control pill being available OTC, and 85% stated women would be more likely to use the birth control pill if available OTC.

What is your opinion of birth control pills being available OTC?



86% somewhat or strongly in favor of OCs OTC

Advocates' opinions of benefits of an OTC OC

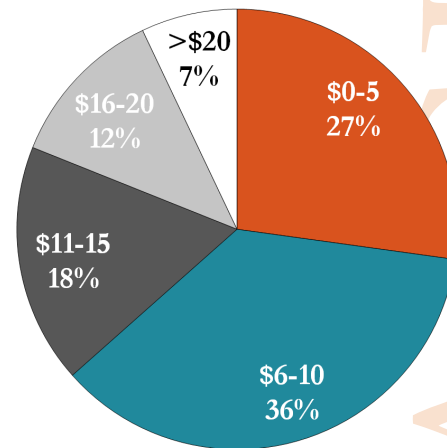
- It would save time/money not to have to visit a health care provider (87%)
- Fewer unintended pregnancies (79%)
- It would improve women's feelings of autonomy or their sense of being in control of their health (74%)
- Drugstores have more convenient hours/locations (70%)

Advocates' concerns about an OTC OC

- Insurance or Medicaid might not pay for it (65%)
- Women might not get their Pap smears or annual exam (65%)
- Women might use the wrong pill for them (56%)
- Women might need a health care provider to determine if the pill is medically safe for them (46%)

Many noted the benefits of OTC access would be contingent on affordability; **93% said OCs should cost \$20 or less.**

How much do you think is a reasonable amount for a woman to pay monthly for an OTC OC?



Overall, support for OTC access among advocates was high:

- 83% considered unintended pregnancy and access to birth control to be very important issues in their communities
- 85% thought women in the communities they work with would be more likely to use the pill if it were available OTC
- 82% believed the communities they work with perceive the pill as very or somewhat safe



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METHODOLOGY

To explore advocates' views regarding OTC access to OCs, we conducted an online survey from July—October 2011 with reproductive justice and reproductive health advocates on their opinions of:

- Current access and barriers to contraception
- The potential impacts of an OTC pill for low-income women, young women, and women of color

Participants were recruited at reproductive justice conferences; via email to and from partner organizations; and through social media outreach.

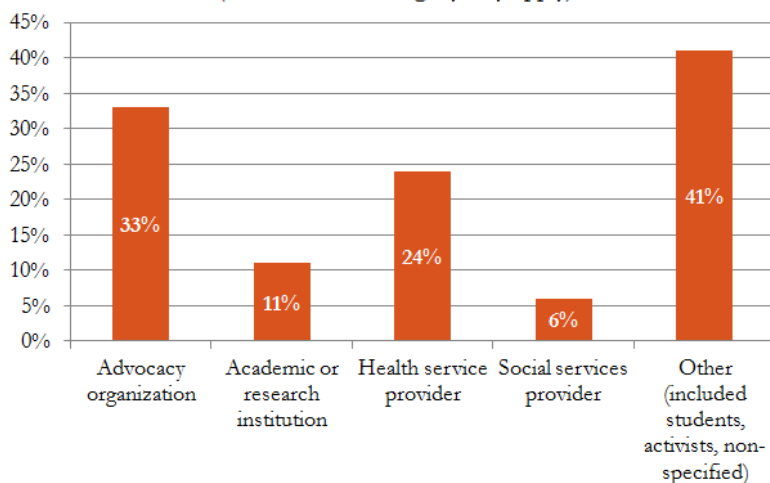
PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

96% of our 782 respondents were female, and the majority (54%) were between 25-39 years old.

63% identified as non-Hispanic White, 17% non-Hispanic Black, 9% Hispanic, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, 4% more than one race, 3% other race, 1% American Indian or Alaska native.

Respondents were asked about their reproductive health involvement. Among those who had worked for a reproductive justice or reproductive health-based organization, most reported the primary population they worked with or on behalf of was low-income women.

Reproductive health/justice involvement
(more than one category may apply)



ADDRESSING CONCERNS

Insurance and Medicaid coverage

Most insurance plans, including Medicaid, are required to cover prescription and OTC contraceptives for women. So, if a birth control pill becomes available OTC, insurance plans will continue to cover it. Insurers can, however, require that women get a prescription for OTC contraceptives in order for them to be covered—but not all of them do. Some state Medicaid plans, for example, allow women to get OTC birth control (like emergency contraception or condoms) covered without requiring a prescription first.

Preventive health care

Some worry that women would miss out on other preventive services, such as Pap smears, if they were not required to visit a clinician for OCs. However, these screening tests are not medically required before prescribing OCs. Requiring a clinician visit in order to obtain OCs could be seen as coercive and punitive to women who face barriers in accessing health services. Moreover, research suggests that women continue to see their health care provider whether or not they are using a prescription contraceptive method.

Determining safety

Research from Mexico, where OCs are available OTC, found that women obtaining OCs at pharmacies without visiting a clinician were no more likely to have a contraindication than those who did visit a clinician. One way for women to determine if OCs are safe for them may be through the use of a simple checklist. Two studies in the United States demonstrated that women were able to accurately self-identify contraindications to birth control use using a checklist.

CONCLUSION

Our survey reinforced the importance of an OTC OC. It also highlighted the need for an OTC pill to be affordable and accompanied by user-friendly information to address concerns like well-woman visits and to ensure that a future OTC OC benefits low-income women, young women, and women of color.