Teenage pregnancy rates in the UK are still the highest in Western Europe. Although 50% of women aged 18–24 use the oral contraceptive pill (OCP), if it is not used correctly the risk of pregnancy increases from 0.2% to more than 3% per year. One reason for this increased risk is due to taking it concurrently with drugs that decrease its effectiveness.

St John’s wort is a popular remedy for mild to moderate depression. It has recently been shown to decrease the effectiveness of the OCP. On 1 March 2000, the UK government issued guidelines for those taking St John’s wort, and warned women using the OCP not to take it. However, it is very readily available, and can be bought from chemists, health-food shops and over the Internet. As such there is rarely anyone to advise the person buying it that it will react with the OCP.

We decided to investigate how much young women knew about what decreased the effectiveness of the OCP, particularly with respect to interactions with St John’s wort and antibiotics, and to see if there was a difference between users and non-users.

In May 2002 we conducted a confidential questionnaire survey of young female A-level students at an FE college in Sunderland. The questionnaire was given to them during their class by their lecturer, and handed back to the lecturer at the end. They were asked if they were taking or had ever taken the OCP, and if they could name a drug and a herbal remedy which decreased its effectiveness.

Of the 130 young women asked to participate, 118 completed questionnaires (response rate 91%). The mean age of women who replied was 18.5 years (range 16–31). Fifty-four per cent (64/118) were taking the OCP.

We found that 64% (41/64) of those taking the OCP knew that antibiotics decreased its effectiveness ($P < 0.0001$). However only 14% (9/64) of those taking the OCP knew that St John’s wort reduced its effectiveness, compared to 0.02% (1/54) of the remainder ($P < 0.05$).

These results suggest that many young women taking the OCP may be unaware of drugs that decrease its effectiveness. This may leave them more susceptible to pregnancy if they do not realise they should be taking extra precautions. This was particularly so with respect to the interaction with St John’s wort. Since GPs and practice nurses are an important source of the OCP for young women, they should consider mentioning the need for extra precautions not only with antibiotics, but also with St John’s wort.

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