PERIOD Dramas

Why are so many women turning away from the pill and using alternative birth control instead? *H&W* investigates…

For many of us, taking the pill (the combined oral contraceptive pill which contains artificial versions of oestrogen and progesterone) is as much a part of our daily life as brushing our teeth, but is this something that we should start to question? Often described as one of the most significant medical advances of recent times, the pill was released in this country in 1961 and swiftly became the world's favourite contraceptive, with 3.5 million women in the UK aged between 16 and 49 taking it every day. It seems that its popularity is beginning to wane however – it's been dogged by health concerns, and women are turning away from it in droves, with around 600,000 of us ditching it from 2011 to 2015, according to the NHS. With this is mind, we explore the side effects of the pill, and the alternatives that are available to us should we want to go down a more natural route.

So, what are the dangers?

A study by the *Telegraph* and the British Pregnancy Advisory Service of 1,000 women aged between 16 and 45 found that a quarter of women surveyed felt worried or nervous about the hormonal contraception they're taking, and that they don't know what it's doing to their bodies. And it's no wonder so many of us are concerned, thanks to the amount of alarming reports of health issues associated with the pill that have been surfacing of late – everything from an increased risk of some cancers, including breast and cervical, to a higher chance of suffering from depression (up to 34 percent with the progesterone only version). As well as that, there are also the everyday side effects, such as bloating, weight gain and breast tenderness, that many women experience.

The dangers only increase the older you get, as Mr Narendra Pisal, consultant gynaecologist at London Gynaecology (london-gynaecology.com), explains. "For women aged between 35 to 54 years, the pill carries a higher risk of thrombosis (which is a blood clot in the legs or to the lungs)," he says. "Many women also suffer from nausea, headache, breakthrough bleeding, fluid retention, low mood and reduced sex drive with the pill. Some women want to avoid taking hormones which is also understandable." If you are tired of dealing with undesirable side effects from your birth control, there are different methods out there, so don't despair.

Is there a natural alternative?

At first, the idea of a natural method of contraception may not appeal, as it sounds like it involves more risk. However, it could be a good option for older women in particular, as Meg Wilson, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at London Gynaecology explains. "Fertility declines from your early 30s, and the likelihood of getting pregnant between the ages

of 45 and 50 is only five percent," she tells us. "For this reason, many women successfully use natural family planning (the rhythm method) during these years."

The rhythm method, also known as fertility awareness, simply involves tracking your menstrual history on a calender to predict when you'll ovulate. This type of solution has had bad press due to unreliability, as human error means that it's just 76 percent effective (compared to the pill, which is 91 percent successful, based on typical use). However, physicist Dr Elina Berglund, along with her partner Raoul Scherwizl, believes she has created the answer with Natural Cycles (£39.99 a year including a thermometer, naturalcycles.com).

Is an app the answer?

The idea of relying on technology for your birth control seems a bit foreign, but many women

are embracing it – over 125,000 people use it in the UK alone and it's set to be a big trend this year. It's the only certified contraceptive app that's been approved for birth control across Europe, and with a 93 percent success rate, it's more effective than the pill. "Natural Cycles is based on an advanced algorithm that adapts to each woman's unique cycle," Elina tells us. "You simply enter your basal body temperature every morning as soon as you wake up using the thermometer provided, as this gives a more accurate reading, then the algorithm crunches the numbers and instantly gives you the result of your fertility status for the day – green meaning you can have unprotected sex, and red meaning that you should use a barrier method. It takes about one to three cycles for the algorithm to get to know your body, so in the beginning you can expect more red days (on which you need to use protection). The great thing about Natural Cycles is that it supports a woman through any stage of her life. Tracking your fertility gives you powerful knowledge and can be used to both prevent or plan a pregnancy, but we also love to see it as a means of getting to know your body."

"A quarter of women feel worried or nervous about the hormonal contraception they're taking"

Before you get started though, it's worth noting that this won't work for all of us. "Natural Cycles is not an ideal contraception for everyone," Elina admits. "If you have regular cycles, and have a rather stable lifestyle, you will get more out of the app. That said, if you forget to measure, or if you have irregular cycles, it won't malfunction, but you will get more red days." While the average age of user is 29, Meg speculates that it's simply the digital side of things that is stopping older woman using the app. "I think this reflects the generation more familiar with the technology, but in future, it will probably be a more popular choice for older women," she says.