



# DR MIRIAM STOPPARD

Helping to keep you fit and healthy



## At last there's news to sweeten the pill

As someone who was involved in the early research on the pill, I got used to study after study announcing side effects and dangers, some true, some not so true. First it was a boon, then a curse.

But now there's news I really welcome because it gives new perspective.

In recent years there have been fears that the combined pill was a serious cancer risk, but new research by the University of Aberdeen has found that for ovarian, endometrial and bowel cancer, it actually has a strong preventive effect.

Furthermore, even though there was a slight increase in risk for breast and cervical cancer, the study showed it was only temporary and the danger vanished a few years after stopping the contraception.

The Oral Contraception Study was started by the Royal College of General Practitioners in 1968, seven years after the pill was first introduced into Britain on the NHS.

It has since followed 46,000 women

Most women won't be at risk of cancer

to monitor the long-term impact. It found that taking the pill for any length of time lowered the number of cases of bowel cancer by a fifth, endometrial cancer by a third and ovarian cancer by a similar amount.

It means that for every three women who would have developed ovarian or endometrial cancer, one has been protected by taking the pill. For bowel

cancer, around one fifth of cases was prevented through oral contraception. Around 35,000 women are diagnosed with the three conditions each year.

"These results from the longest-running study in the world into oral contraceptive use are reassuring," said lead author Dr Lisa Iversen.

"They provide strong evidence that

most women do not expose themselves to long-term cancer harm if they choose to use oral contraception - indeed many are likely to be protected.

"Because the study has been going for such a long time, we are able to look at the very long-term effects, if there are any, associated with the pill.

"Specifically, pill users don't have an overall increased risk of cancer over their lifetime and that the protective effects of some specific cancers last for at least 30 years."

Professor Helen Stokes-Lampard, chair of the Royal College of GPs, said: "Millions of women who use the combined oral contraceptive pill should be reassured by this comprehensive research that they are not at increased risk of cancer as a result - and that taking the pill might actually decrease their risk of certain cancers."

Good news for the three million women taking the combined contraceptive pill. Charities say it provides more evidence that there were few long-term health hazards.

### How to get restful sleep

Just as a bedtime routine helps children, the body and brain of adults respond to bedtime cues and rituals, so try to have a wind-down routine that you follow every night.

Alcohol doesn't help you to sleep, it does the opposite, so if it's sound sleep you want, avoid booze late in the evening.

Being either too hot or too cold can prevent sleep, so spend some effort on making your bedroom temperature equable.

If you have a tendency towards insomnia anything will keep you awake, so turn off dripping taps, close any squeaking doors and batten down anything that can flap in a draught.

Learn some kind of self-hypnosis that induces sleep quite quickly when you can't drop off - mine is counting backwards from 10, repeating "I'm falling asleep" with each number. I've never got beyond five.

Wear loose-fitting cotton sleepwear or none at all.

Change your mattress every seven years or so.

If your partner likes music or television last thing, don't get worked up - snuggle down with earplugs and an eye shade.

If you wake up in the early hours and can't get back to sleep, don't lie there and fume. Get up, do the odd chore, make a cup of tea, do a crossword, read and when you're feeling sleepy go back to bed.

Only ever take sleeping pills in the short term to get you over a bad patch.

Sex is the best prelude to sleep.

### Ask Dr Miriam

**Q** I'm in my mid-40s and I noticed that my hands shake every so often. It's particularly noticeable if I place a piece of paper on the palm of my hand. Should I be worried?

**A** Now and then, we all experience this gentle shaking of our hands, exaggerated by placing a sheet of paper on them. It's a harmless physiological tremor.

While we all have it, it can be made worse during times of stress or by sleep deprivation. This

is because we produce more adrenaline than usual and that in itself can cause the tremor.



Shaky hands can run in families but it also can be triggered by asthma inhalers, though we don't know exactly why. They may act as stimulants.

These tremors are harmless. There's no treatment for them but you might try cutting down on caffeine because it's also a stimulant.

If you are really worried, see your doctor for reassurance.

### TOP TIPS

### STRETCHING DOS AND DON'TS

#### DO

- Warm up so that muscles, tendons and ligaments stretch more easily.
- Try light activity, such as walking and pumping your arms. Spend at least 5-10 minutes warming up.
- Stretch after a shower or bath if you don't have time to warm up. That way your body temperature will be higher, so muscles will be more pliable.
- Hold each stretch for 10-30 seconds. Let the muscle lengthen slowly. Do two to four repetitions of each stretch.
- Stretch first thing in the morning to jump-start your day.
- Take yoga or Tai Chi classes as they improve flexibility and will help you stick to a stretching schedule.
- Stretch if your muscles hurt as studies suggest that stretching can relieve muscle soreness.



#### DON'T

- Stretch to the point of pain. It's normal to feel a pulling sensation or mild discomfort.
- Bounce the stretch. This isn't as effective and shortens muscles instead of lengthening them.
- Force a stretch marathon. Thirty minutes is recommended but even five minutes is better than nothing.
- Confuse your fitness goals. Stretches alone don't help you get stronger or build your endurance.

### WEBSITE OF THE WEEK

#### youngpilepsy.org.uk

Young Epilepsy is the charity supporting 112,000 children and young people living with the condition in the UK. Epilepsy is one of the least talked about health conditions, yet it affects around 600,000 people in this country and around 1,000 die as a result of it every year. Young Epilepsy's site offers information and support to anyone affected by the condition.

### BUST THAT MYTH ABOUT DEPRESSION

**Myth 1: 'Depression isn't a real illness'** Depression isn't just sadness, it's a complex mental health disorder. It has social, psychological and biological origins and it can be treated in a variety of ways. If you think you may be suffering from depression, don't write it off as normal, talk to your doctor.

**Myth 2: 'You can simply 'snap out of it'** Some people think that depression happens when you allow yourself to wallow. They may think it can be cured with positive thoughts or a change in attitude. Depression is a medical condition in which your brain chemistry, function and structure are negatively affected by environmental or biological factors.

**Myth 3: 'Antidepressants will change your personality'** Antidepressants are designed to change only certain chemicals in your brain. After taking them, many people with depression begin to feel like themselves again. If you don't like how you feel while taking antidepressants, talk to your doctor.

SORRY BUT I CAN'T ANSWER LETTERS PERSONALLY