

Was the contraceptive pill break implemented to satisfy the Pope?

Decades of prescriptions have incorporated a 7-day break for taking the contraceptive pill. But new guidelines contravene this practice. Were they originally prescribed in this way to please the Pope?



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For 60 years, women taking the combined oral contraceptive pill have done so with a week-long "break" in between packets. In this break period, most women have a "withdrawal bleed". However, new medical guidance from the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH) published last month, [reversed decades of medical advice](#) that women should stop taking the pill for one week in every four weeks. It said that the contraceptive pill can be safely taken back-to-back and that there is no health benefit to a seven-day break.

WHAT'S THE CLAIM?

The announcement prompted confusion about how the pill works, uproar at the perceived [trivialization of women's reproductive health](#), and questions about why the pill break was introduced.

Some reports have since [claimed](#) that the break was devised to appease the Pope and the Catholic Church. But such reports contain misinformation.

As told to [The Telegraph](#) and cited by [The Independent](#) among others, Professor John Guillebaud, a family planning professor at University College London, said:

"The gynecologist John Rock devised [the break] because he hoped that the Pope would accept the pill and make it acceptable for Catholics to use."

Information has now been widely circulated implying that women have been taking the pill in a standard way because of pill developer Dr John Rock's desire to please the Pope.

WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

In 1950s America, Catholic gynecologist Dr John Rock started experimenting with "pseudo pregnancies" for women who were trying to conceive, but weren't able to. He administered 50 milligrams of progesterone and five milligrams of oestrogen, escalating the doses gradually. After the trial, none of the women were ill, and 13 of the 80 women got pregnant after stopping the hormones. A by-product of the trial was the discovery that the hormones acted as a contraceptive.

However, while on the hormones, some of the women experienced effects that mimicked pregnancy symptoms, such as tender breasts and nausea, leading some of them to believe they were pregnant. Biologist Dr Gregory Pincus suggested a 5-day break from the pill so the women would return to "normal", be free from the side-effects of the huge dose of hormones in the medication at the time, and menstruate (which we now know is a withdrawal bleed, not a real period).

The researchers thought this set-up would be better both for women trying to get pregnant and those trying not to. While women avoiding pregnancy could be sure they weren't pregnant when their bodies briefly returned to normal, Rock believed women trying to get pregnant were more likely to become pregnant after taking the estrogen and progesterone supplements. A plus for Dr Rock, was that taking the pill with a break was more like the body's natural fluctuations of hormones, therefore more like the calendar-based "rhythm method" -- an accepted form of birth control amongst most Catholics because of its "natural" connotations.

This is all according to research outlined in journalist Jonathan Eig's book about the history of the pill, *The Birth of the Pill: How Four Crusaders Reinvented Sex and Launched a Revolution*, part of which is published on [The Atlantic](#). Eig's book is regarded as a factual history of the development of the pill. Meanwhile, other prominent researchers and developers of the oral contraceptive pill confirm the break was [devised to relieve women of the fear they were pregnant while taking the pill](#).

"The men designing the pill wanted to make women comfortable with the idea of hormonal birth control," Eig told NewsMavens. They wanted to make it seem as natural as possible, which is why they included placebos. "They felt that if women had a period every month it would reassure them they were not pregnant."

"Later, when they began seeking government approval for the pill and when they began lobbying the Vatican, this became a part of their argument," Eig added. "They argued that the pill was really a way of regulating women's cycles and that it was, in a sense, a modern improvement on the rhythm method, which the Vatican did permit."

"It is misleading and oversimplified to suggest that the pill's design was in any way meant to win the Pope's approval," Eig told NewsMavens. "The pill was designed to best fit the needs of women. Period. Pun intended."

Jonathan Eig
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The Pill was definitely NOT designed to please the Pope. It was designed for women. Period. Pun intended.
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