

Womankind: Is Seasonale® Reasonable?

By Elaine Stillerman, LMT

Is there anyone else feeling disgusted and outraged at the latest assault on women by the pharmaceutical industry? Are women so gullible that we believe these mega-billion dollar giants have our best interests in mind when they claim that the female reproductive system is broken and needs fixing?

I was sitting home one evening, minding my own business, when a commercial for Seasonale® came on. In the ad, several 20-something waifs, clad in white dresses with pink polka dots, were kicking the dots as they fell off the dresses until there were only four left. The dots symbolized (menstrual) periods - one dot per period - get it? That's the gimmick. You would never wear white when you have your period (or after Labor Day), and this miracle contraception provides effective birth control protection plus cuts down the number of menstrual cycles to only four - one per Seasonale® . I wanted to hurl.

Brought to you by the same industry that labels menopause "estrogen deficiency syndrome" (and wanted to sell drugs to change that until the dangers of hormone replacement therapy became widely accepted), this birth control pill is made with lower doses of the same estrogen (ethinyl estradiol) and progestin (levonorgestrel) found in conventional birth control pills, but the usage is vastly different. Instead of taking the pill for 21 days followed by seven days of placebo, Seasonale® is taken for 84 days and seven days of placebo so the normal number of menstruation cycles, 13-14 per year, dwindles to four.

I suppose there are a number of women who applaud this innovation. Those who suffer from severe menstrual cramps, have extreme bleeding, or consider their monthly cycles an inconvenience would probably welcome relief from these symptoms. But these women are not the target population, and the strategy is to convince all women of childbearing age that it's okay to mess with Mother Nature and reduce the number of periods.

Approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in September 2003 to prevent pregnancy, this oral contraceptive acts like the traditional birth control pill by suppressing ovulation and making the cervical mucus hostile to sperm. It prevents the endometrium (uterine lining) from growing thick enough to support fertilization; however, the hormones of this drug prevent the endometrium from growing at all. As birth control, it is 99 percent effective if taken as directed, compared to the 95-percent effective rate of traditional birth control pills. Supporters also maintain that decreasing the number of periods can prevent anemia and incidences of endometriosis, which is often linked with pelvic pain and infertility. There is even some inference that this pill may reduce the risk of ovarian and endometrial cancers.

Conversely, as with any birth control pill, Seasonale® does not protect the user from HIV or any other sexually transmitted diseases. Its side-effects are similar to those of standard birth control pills and include nausea, vomiting, weight gain, breast soreness and breakthrough bleeding; however, users of Seasonale® may experience more breakthrough bleeding, particularly in the first few months. So, perhaps avoiding white garments should also be on the warning label.

Seasonale® is not appropriate for women with blood-clotting disorders or those who have risk factors for heart disease or stroke, such as elevated blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and high cholesterol, nor is it safe for smokers and women over 35. But these warnings are ubiquitous with all birth control pills.

There are a number of doctors who maintain that missing periods is not a good idea. It is a monthly hormonal cycle that should not be artificially controlled. Women who take Seasonale® ingest nine more weeks of estrogen and progestin every year; although clinical studies have not proven an increased risk to these women, long-term usage has not been evaluated.

But what upsets me is the way the marketing of this drug tries to suggest that having monthly periods is a mere inconvenience that can be safely eliminated. It plays into the idea that women, who rarely rejoice when they menstruate, can deny their womanhood and fool their own biology by ceasing to menstruate. It's a psychological ploy to convince us that our bodily functions are unnatural and need to be controlled.

Women of childbearing age bleed once a month. That's the way it always has been and that's the way it should remain. Trying to convince women that there is a better way to experience that which makes us uniquely women is doing a great disservice and borders on misogyny.

Resources

- Anderson, Freedolph. Interviewed by Maggie Gallagher, On the Line, National Public Radio. Dec. 26, 2003.
 - Barr Laboratories. Seasonale® 2004.
 - FDA Talk Paper, "FDA Approves Seasonal Oral Contraceptive." www.fda.gov. 2003.
 - Malena, Patrice C. Eastern Virginia Medical School. Phone interview with Maggie Gallagher.
 - National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association, Birth Control A-to-Z. www.ivillagehealth.com. 2004.
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