

Part 2: Beyond the lab — campus reactions to male birth control pill

Hi everyone! I'm Grace Aigner from the Minnesota Daily. Welcome back to another episode of In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

In my last episode, we talked to the scientists behind the new male birth control pill—Gunda Georg from the university's College of Pharmacy, and Nadja Mannowetz and Akash Bakshi from YourChoice Therapeutics—about how and why they're developing this non-hormonal contraceptive option.

Georg, Bakshi and Mannowetz said last episode that they are creating the male pill, called YCT 529, to give men a more reliable contraceptive than condoms, to help people better manage their fertility and to relieve women of the sole responsibility of contraception and its negative effects.

Today, we're flipping the script from scientists to students and professors. We'll hear from the University of Minnesota community about their reactions to, concerns about and hopes for, the male pill.

Emily Winderman, a communication studies professor in the College of Liberal Arts who studies how we speak publicly about science and health technology, said women's contraceptive responsibility is the result of traditional gender norms.

EMILY WINDERMAN: In many ways, it's related to sex and gender roles, right? It's deeply related to questions of socially constituted or created responsibilities about who bears responsibility for getting pregnant, versus impregnating.

And so, because it is really something that has been in the realm of, you know, women's and people with female reproductive systems' responsibility, the desire, the push, the funding has not always been available even though the technology has been in the works for quite some time.

AIGNER: The desire for contraception is as old as human civilization, Winderman said. The regulation and restriction of it is a relatively modern issue, largely because of the [1873 Comstock Act](#). The act prohibited the circulation of obscene or pornographic material, which included criminalizing the distribution of birth control and contraceptive information throughout the U.S..

Given this history of contraceptive restriction in the U.S., Winderman said birth control is inherently linked to personal freedom and free speech.

For Claudia Garcia, a fourth-year student at the University of Minnesota and a former columnist and editor for the Minnesota Daily, her own experiences with birth control motivated her to report about it in a column for the Daily.

CLAUDIA GARCIA: I remember speaking to Alexis, the Editor-in-Chief; I remember telling her about how, like, I was just feeling so anxious and depressed for so long, and then like I was telling her, “Oh, I just lowered my dosage in my birth control and I just feel like, I don’t know I feel like myself again.”

And she was telling me, you should write a story about that. You should write a piece on that, like it’s something other women or other people going through the same thing would wanna hear about.

AIGNER: Garcia started taking a hormonal birth control pill to relieve extreme menstrual pain, but in exchange, dealt with severe depression on her first prescription. Once her doctor changed her pill’s hormonal dosage, she said she felt like herself again.

GARCIA: When I started writing it, it was like therapy, almost. It was like all these things and all these like feelings I was thinking, I’ve been bottling for so long and writing this piece felt like I was validating myself and validating what I went through, you know?

I remember I put out a Snapchat thing on the UMN story, and I was asking if you have, you know, had issues taking birth control or you have experiences, I’m writing a story and I’d like to get your perspective. And there were so, oh my God, it was insane how many girls reached out to me. How many people reached out to me.

I couldn’t fit all of their stories, and I couldn’t even interview all of them. The same way I’ve been bottling it up, they’ve been bottling it up.

AIGNER: As Garcia learned through her reporting, experiences on the female birth control pill can vary greatly, and stories like hers are more common than we might assume.

Tessa Otto, a fourth-year student majoring in economics, said while she’s had a good experience on the pill, she knows women who haven’t—including a friend of hers who developed Polycystic ovary syndrome, or PCOS, after starting the pill. She said she wants more options for non-hormonal contraceptives for women.

TESSA OTTO: I would like the opportunity to be able to have a non-hormonal birth control. I know a lot of people go on birth control because of hormonal reasons, but later in life, hormones kind of chill out a little bit.

So I think that would be nice for people to have at least a decision to make or like a different option to choose from. If they don’t want the potential for after effects, after going off the pill, which the non-hormonal pill would be able to give you.

AIGNER: Though the wait continues for more non-hormonal, female birth control, the male pill could be a promising new contraceptive option that changes how we think about gender and contraceptives, Winderman said.

WINDERMAN: I think it would be, certainly, a watershed moment in gender relationships because it would potentially balance that sort of autonomy and agency, right?

It would allow women and folks with female reproductive systems that maybe can't tolerate hormones particularly well to not have to use them and at the same time, it would allow men and people with male reproductive systems to claim something that is more reliable than condoms or something more permanent, right? Like a vasectomy.

At the same time, it would open up new questions and conversations between partners about who is bearing that responsibility. So it could really open up new interpersonal dynamics that we here to for, have not seen yet.

AIGNER: As Georg, Bakshi and Mannowetz discussed last episode, they've received a lot of encouraging responses from men who are interested in taking the male pill.

Gus Sargent, a fourth-year student, said he's open to using the male pill as long as it doesn't have long-lasting effects on fertility after stopping the medication. He said a male contraceptive pill would give men an additional level of protection.

GUS SARGENT: I think a big plus is like, some of my friends, like people who are for contraception and like for condoms and agree with all that, they'll just forget to have a condom, and like it happens. And I feel like if you're taking a pill, it's a more routine thing that can be consistent and just makes it more flexible if you're seeing multiple partners.

It's just more security in conjunction with a condom because obviously you want to prevent the spread of STDs, and they break though. So like I would appreciate, and I know a lot of people would appreciate, that second layer of protection, you know?

AIGNER: Otto, who said her boyfriend would also consider using the male pill, is excited by the opportunity for men and women to share the responsibility of long-term contraception.

OTTO: I think it's important to be able to give a different form of birth control to a different gender because I know it, the responsibility kind of falls on the woman in the most part. I mean like, besides condoms and stuff.

For more secure feelings of not getting pregnant or like STDs, birth control and condoms are important. I think it's kind of cool that a man would be able to have the opportunity to take or share some of that responsibility.

AIGNER: Garcia, Sargent and Otto are all interested in the developing male pill, and see it as a useful new contraceptive option especially for college students. However, some students are concerned about deciding whether or not to trust if a male partner is actually on the pill, or if they are avoiding using a condom.

GARCIA: When I did that story, I think one of the biggest questions that came up for me and for a lot of, like my girl friends, I was telling this to was, “I wouldn’t trust a guy if he told me he was on the pill.” And it could be flipped, too, like a guy being like, I wouldn’t trust a girl. But then at the end of the day, it doesn’t affect the guy as much as it affects the girl.

But I think that’s in situations of hookup culture, of course, and you’d have to be able to trust your hookup partner. But in terms of a committed partner, I think it’s a great option if it’s for the purpose of contraceptive, preventing pregnancies.

AIGNER: This lack of trust could be considered a new version of [“stealthing,”](#) Winderman said, which is when someone lies about wearing a condom or takes it off without consent during sex.

WINDERMAN: I could imagine seeing that discourse for sure. But it opens up questions about stealthing, right? When somebody says, “Yeah, yeah, I’m on the pill,” the male birth control pill, and then they’re really not. So I can imagine new dynamics that have to be negotiated interpersonally as well as the way that responsibility is talked about in the larger public discourse.

AIGNER: Trust is not the only concern about the male pill. Though Sargent is in a committed relationship and not personally worried about STDs, he said the male pill can not, and should not, be a replacement for a condom, especially for college students who may be seeing more than one partner.

SARGENT: I don’t think it’s a replacement for a condom. The condom will always be necessary and will always have its place. I think it is more a replacement of female, hormonal birth control. As far as like hookup culture goes, I don’t think it should change much. I think that for like one-night stands and stuff like that, and people that you don’t really know, I think that it’s probably always best to still be using a condom.

AIGNER: Garcia, Sargent and Otto remain wary of the broader, long-term impacts of the new contraceptive. Garcia is excited by the potential of a male birth control pill, but wants more research put into developing medications for specifically targeting period pain, acne and other female health issues.

GARCIA: It just feels like birth control has become just this quick fix, just something you could slap on period pain and on PMS and on all these irregularities in your period. It’s just, it feels like an easy and lucrative way to solve that issue.

I think another thing is pain is natural for women. That rhetoric as a woman, you’re just gonna have to feel pain, and that’s life. I think that may be true, but why does it have to be true? Why does it have to be that way? If we can find a male birth control pill, just as much as we did that we can find ways for women to help their period pain, to help their irregularities.

AIGNER: Winderman said she wants people to be aware of how the male pill could have an impact on how we talk about contraception and reproductive health policy.

WINDERMAN: Right now we are seeing a moment when birth control is being equated with abortion. That is a problem. One, it's a problem because of abortion stigma, but two, when you begin to conflate those two things it begins to take the stigma from one and place it on the other. And it begins to take the legal restrictions that have now been authorized onto one, and then place it on the other.

I know we're talking about male birth control, but this is all in the same ecology that we need to be really careful about the ways that different technologies become associated with each other, and then disassociated from each other.

So when abortion is disassociated from healthcare, it becomes possible to deny a very legitimate form of healthcare. And similarly to contraception, when female and male contraception is dissociated from healthcare and associated with another stigmatized healthcare, it becomes a warrant or justification to limit that.

AIGNER: Winderman, talking about the potential impact of the male pill on reproductive healthcare, referenced a [1973 quote](#) from Black feminist and civil rights lawyer Florynce Kennedy, who said "if men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament."

WINDERMAN: That tells you a lot about what the gender relationships between issues of control, autonomy and availability of that. So I might extend Kennedy's quip, if and when we have a male birth control, birth control may well for men and people with male reproductive parts be a sacrament.

AIGNER: The new male pill, or YCT 529, will be in clinical trials for the foreseeable future. But as we heard in this episode, students and staff at the University of Minnesota are already excited for, and curious about how the new contraceptive could change their lives and the world around them.

And I hope you think about how this new medication could change yours. Would you use the male pill? Would you ask someone in your life to? Why or why not? Feel free to leave a comment with your thoughts at mndaily.com. I know I'll be considering the same questions.

That's all I've got for you today, folks. This episode was written by Grace Aigner and produced by Ceci Heinen. Thanks for listening, and if you have any questions, comments or concerns, don't be afraid to send us an email at podcasting@mndaily.com. I'd love to hear from you!

My name is Grace Aigner, and I'll talk to you next time on In The Know.