

Women in sport

What does the research say about contraception and female athletes?

Emma Ross:

A female athlete might use hormonal contraception for one of three reasons. So the first for its intended purpose to act as a contraceptive and to prevent unwanted pregnancy. A female athlete might use it for what we call menstrual management. So that means making the cycle more predictable, managing any symptoms which might interfere with her training or performing, and even to manage symptoms around a particularly big event or competition.

And the third reason might be because they have particularly debilitating symptoms associated with the hormonal fluctuations of the cycle. And they might be heavy menstrual bleeding, acne, or very debilitating period pain. In a typical menstrual cycle, you have these peaks and troughs as the hormones oestrogen and progesterone fluctuate across the cycle.

But what happens when you're using hormonal contraceptives is that you are delivering synthetic hormones into your system. And so your body's own production of oestrogen and progesterone is suppressed and you no longer have a natural menstrual cycle.

Some women won't have a bleed at all whilst they're using hormonal contraception and for others they still will have a regular bleed. But it's important to note that this isn't actually a period, it's known as a withdrawal bleed. And the reason that's important is because the period is a vital sign of health, but this bleed that you have when you're using hormonal contraception doesn't actually represent that.

Now we understand that things like strength, power, endurance are not impacted by the hormonal fluctuations across a natural menstrual cycle. And actually largely, the same can be said for women who are using hormonal contraception. Their strength and their power isn't impacted by using hormonal contraception.

With one exception, though that there is some well controlled research which shows that aerobic endurance measured by VO₂ max can be decreased in those women using the pill. And the reason that was great research is because it used women as their own controls, they had women who weren't using the pill and they measured their VO₂ max.

And then those women started taking the pill and they found that their aerobic endurance was decreased by up to 11%. And I think the important thing to remember here is that using

hormonal contraception is a very individual choice. And what's important is to find the right solution and the right strategy that suits you.