

CONTRACEPTION IN FRANCE

The French contraceptive model has changed in recent years: the Fecond survey shows a fall in oral contraception use, accelerated by the 2012-2013 scare about the effects of 3rd and 4th-generation birth control pills.

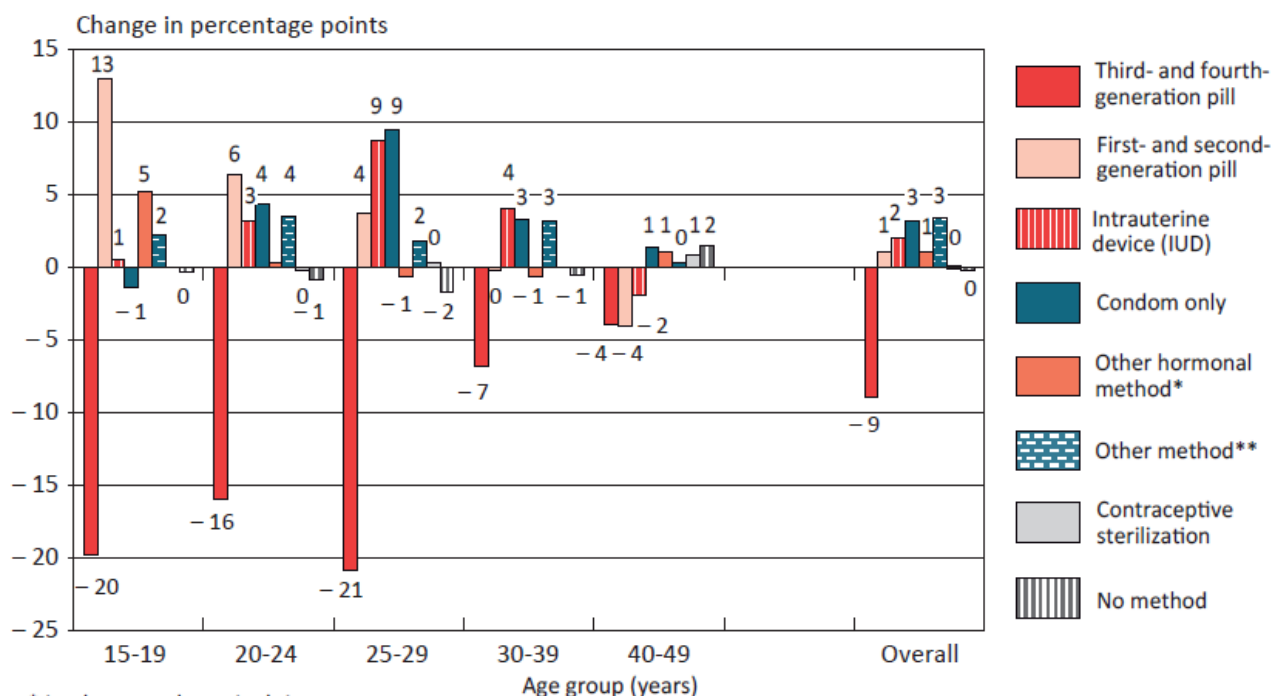
Since 2000, the contraception landscape in France has changed in several significant ways. The Aubry Act of 4 July 2001 enabled minors to consult a physician of their choice without the need for parental consent; it also legalised contraceptive sterilisation. Moreover, new hormonal contraception methods, including implants, patches and vaginal rings, have become available in recent years. Lastly, the 2012-2013 controversy around new-generation birth control pills led some women in France to abandon oral contraception.

The Fecond survey, conducted in 2010 and again in 2013 by INSERM and INED, allows for examining the latest trends in contraception, including methods used by women's age and social background and practices among healthcare professionals.

The pill is still the leading contraceptive method in France, but its standing has been called into question in the last few years.

The controversy around the risk of vein thrombosis associated with 3rd and 4th-generation birth control pills worked to accelerate the unprecedented fall in pill use observed since the early 2000s.

Figure 1. Changes in contraceptive methods used in France between 2010 and 2013 by women's age



* implant, patch, vaginal ring

**Withdrawal, periodic abstinence, local method

(N. Bajos et al., Population & Societies, n° 511, INED, May 2014)

Source: Fecond survey (2013), INSERM-INED.

Interpretation: the proportion of women aged 25-29 using a third- or fourth- generation pill fell by 21 points between 2010 and 2013 (28% in 2010 and 7% in 2013).

Coverage: Women aged 15-49 living in metropolitan France who are not sterile or pregnant, who have heterosexual sexual relations and do not want to have a child.

From 2010 to 2013, the oral contraception use rate fell from 50% to 41% among women aged 15-49 years (i.e., women for whom contraception is relevant because they are of childbearing age). This decline is due to a fall in use of the pills implicated in the scare—from 19% to 10% in three years. But not many women turned instead to 2nd-generation pills, (taken by for 23% of users in 2013 as against 22% in 2010), a finding that suggests disaffection for the pill in general. The fall in use is particularly steep among young women under 30 years, particularly women aged 25-29, more of who have turned to the IUD (intra-uterine device) or condoms.

The IUD, which prior to 2010 had been chosen primarily by older women and women who have already had children, gained ground from 2010-2013 among women aged 20-24 (rising from 2% to 5%) and aged 25-29 (from 8% to 16%). However, no change is observable for women under 20 or aged 20-24 yrs without children. Doctors still seem reluctant to prescribe the IUD to these young women.

Now as before, women who use no contraception and yet do not wish to get pregnant represent a very small minority—around 3%. Most women choose condoms at sexual debut; the proportion of women using them declines with age.

Social inequalities in access to contraception persist: women in difficult financial circumstances or with low educational attainment more frequently (than other women) do not use any method of contraception. Following the new-generation pill scare, women managers, who until then had been the largest group of pill users, turned either toward the IUD or, in some cases, “natural” methods (estimating ovulation dates and pre-ejaculation withdrawal). There was no change, however, in the practices of women manual workers, fewer of who were using the pill.

Overall, women without financial difficulties were the ones to shift from the new-generation pills to older ones whereas women in more straitened circumstances, namely women born in sub-Saharan Africa, more often turned to “natural” methods, considerably less effective than medical ones.

The 2010 - 2013 Fecond surveys

The Fecond survey was carried out by INSERM and INED in 2010 to analyse various issues related to sexual and reproductive health (contraception, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, infertility, sexual dysfunction) in France. It was conducted on a representative random sample of 5,275 women and 3,373 men aged 15-49 living in metropolitan France. The survey was conducted again in 2013 to analyse the impact of the media pill scare on contraceptive practices and representations. The questionnaire was administered to 4,453 women and 1,587 men.

The media debate of 2012-2013 on third- and fourth-generation pills

On 14 December 2012, following a complaint filed against a pharmaceutical company by a young woman using a third generation pill who had suffered a stroke that left her severely disabled, a major French daily newspaper ran a lead story entitled “Warning About the Pill”. This gave rise to intense media debate over the following weeks on the risk of deep venous thrombosis associated with third- and fourth-generation combined pills, a risk which had been demonstrated as early as 1995. The risk of this side-effect is 2 in 10,000 annually among women not taking oral contraceptives, 5-7 in 10,000 among women taking a second-generation pill, and 9-12 in 10,000 among women taking third-generation pills (source: Agence Nationale de Sécurité du Médicament, ANSM). The Ministry of Health decided to halt reimbursement of third and fourth-generation pills beginning on 31 March 2013, and to withdraw the pill Diane-35, an anti-acne treatment with contraceptive properties, in May 2013, although it was returned to the market in January 2014 at the request of the European Medicines Agency.

LINKS FOR MORE INFO

[Methods of contraception 1978-2010](#)

[Population and Societies n° 492](#): Contraception in France: new context, new practices?

[Population and Societies n° 511](#): The French pill scare: towards a new contraceptive model?

