Menstruation: postponing periods

The holiday hormone: norethisterone

As the summer approaches so do the requests for that holiday essential: norethisterone! Despite all the innovations we have to render menstruation obsolete (combined hormonal preparations, depot, IUS) women seem still to like having a nice reassuring period, except when they go on holiday!

Norethisterone has, in effect, become a lifestyle drug and in a review article Diana Mansour tells us why we should probably exercise caution before mass prescribing norethisterone (J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care 2012;38:148).

What is norethisterone?

- Progestogen derived from testosterone.
- Used in CHC and hormone replacement preparations.
- Prescribed as a treatment for dysfunctional uterine bleeding, endometrial protection and postponement of menstruation.
- To postpone menstruation: give 5mg tds daily starting 3d before expected onset of menstruation until no longer needed.

Risk of VTE

Studies have reported increased risk of VTE in women taking progestogens such as norethisterone in high doses.

Further research has found that norethisterone is partially metabolised to ethinyloestradiol. This conversion is not important at low doses (e.g. in CHC or HRT), but a daily dose of 10-20mg of norethisterone is estimated to be equivalent to taking a 20-30mcg pill. This may explain its efficacy in controlling menstruation.

MRHA guidance

The MRHA SPC lists the following main contraindications for norethisterone:

- Pregnancy.
- Hepatic disease.
- History of breast cancer.
- Undiagnosed vaginal bleeding.
- Genital tract tumours.
- High risk of arterial disease.
- History of VTE or PE.

The SPCs for specific brands are more restrictive. For example, the SPC for Primolut lists migraine with aura as a contraindication and includes a section warning about the metabolisation to ethinyloestradiol.

In summary: therapeutic norethisterone should be regarded as a combination-like product with oestrogenic properties and inherent VTE risk, so apply the same risk assessment categories as with combined hormonal preparations, i.e. treat it like the pill.

Alternative treatments for postponing menstruation

One small study has suggested 10mg medroxyprogesterone acetate tds is as effective as norethisterone without the associated risks.

Remember: neither norethisterone nor medroxyprogesterone acetate are licensed for contraception in these doses.
Postponing menstruation

- Norethisterone is prescribed in a dose of 5mg tds to postpone menstruation.
- Some studies have found high dose progestogens are associated with increased VTE risk.
- Norethisterone is partially metabolised to ethinyloestradiol which may explain an increased VTE risk.
- It should be avoided in women at increased risk of VTE.
- Medroxyprogesterone acetate 10mg tds offers a safer alternative for high risk women.

*We make every effort to ensure the information in these pages is accurate and correct at the date of publication, but it is of necessity of a brief and general nature, and this should not replace your own good clinical judgement, or be regarded as a substitute for taking professional advice in appropriate circumstances. In particular check drug doses, adverse effects and interactions with the British National Formulary. Save insofar as any such liability cannot be excluded at law, we do not accept any liability for loss of any type caused by reliance on the information in these pages.*

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London
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Thur 13 Oct

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Leeds
Wed 5 Oct
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- The Telephone Consultation Course (location).......................... (date)..........................
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