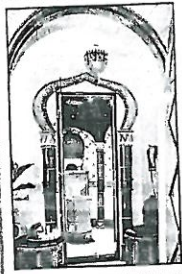


Fab finds

Every week we try dozens of products and treatments. Here are some of the best

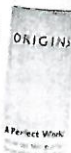


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M HEALTH

My nine-month waiting period

I'D been on the combined oral contraceptive pill for 10 years when I decided last November that it was time to give my body a break.

Having recently got married, I thought a rethink in contraception might be in order prior to starting a family in a few years. I'd had breaks from the pill before and my periods always returned with clockwork-like precision.

Not so this time. By the fourth month I was concerned. I consulted friends, who revealed similar problems. In fact, four months paled into insignificance when a friend confided that her periods were absent for three years, eventually corrected by a medical herbalist.

I went to my doctor. I hadn't noticed lots of tiny spots under the skin around my hairline and began to wonder if it could be a symptom of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS). Acne, along with weight gain and increased facial and body hair are classic PCOS symptoms, especially in a woman experiencing irregular or absent periods.

My GP was doubtful, but sent me for a scan anyway. It revealed a few small cysts on both ovaries, but blood tests revealed normal hormone levels. Apparently many women have cysts on their ovaries without ever experiencing any symptoms.

My GP explained the follicles on my ovaries are formed when I don't release an egg each month (as you do with a healthy menstrual cycle).

Now off the pill, it seems my body is having a hard time regulating itself. The pill controls the hormonal profile of your ovaries, explains Dr Laura Cassidy, consultant gynaecologist at the Inverclyde Royal Hospital.

During a normal, pill-free cycle, the pituitary gland produces two hormones essential for a regular menstrual cycle: luteinising hormone (LH) and follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH). These encourage the production of oestrogen and progesterone in the ovaries for ovulation.

The pill - a synthetic form of oestrogen and progesterone - stops the pituitary gland from controlling the ovaries. So when you come off the pill, it can take the pituitary gland a while to kick

Ten years of regular periods came to an abrupt halt when **CLAIRE ROBERTS**, 28, came off the pill. It turns out that many of her friends were experiencing the same problem - here she discovers why

in again.

Most women find that the body rights itself within a year or 18 months. Dr Rebecca Small, associate medical director of Bupa, says: "Waiting a year for periods to return is by no means uncommon and is a condition suffered by two per cent of the female population."

GPs often recommend going back on the pill to regulate hormone levels, but what if this covers up any potential fertility problems, only to be discovered when you're desperately broody?

"Eighteen period-free months is not harmful," says Dr Cassidy. "But any longer and you run a higher risk of developing osteoporosis because of low levels of oestrogen."

"Going back on the pill offsets the risk of osteoporosis and won't disguise any fertility problems if you've had a scan and blood tests, as these show up abnormalities."

"It's not that more women are having trouble conceiving these days, it's just that they're putting off

having babies until their mid-30s or later, and after 15-odd years on the pill their bodies take a while to re-adjust. Then they panic.

"This causes higher levels of the stress hormone prolactin to be released into the body, which blocks the pituitary gland's ability to stimulate the ovaries, hence no periods. When they stop worrying they tend to fall pregnant."

"There is no evidence to suggest that women are increasingly experiencing irregular or absent periods," says Dr John Gullebaud, Emeritus Professor of Family Planning and Reproductive Health at University College, London.

"The pill's withdrawal bleeds - artificial periods - will mask a condition such as PCOS, for instance, but it is not to blame for the con-

dition itself. There is no evidence that it is caused by the combined oral contraceptive pill."

But how could I help my body naturally? I decided to go down the alternative path.

Tests using the BEST (Bio-Energetic Stress Testing) system, which is a non-invasive means of determining hormone levels in the body revealed that levels of oestrogen and progesterone, were slightly low - the hormones are key for regular menstruation.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) can help to regulate the menstrual cycle, so I consulted Chinese healthcare specialist Sen.

My therapist, Simeen, pronounced that my liver energy, or "chi", was stagnant.

Simeen explained: "If this is deficient it can have a pronounced effect on periods." My treatment (acupuncture and herbs) would support the liver chi and move the blood around the body.

"TCM harmonises and supports the body's own systems to help it function at its best," says Simeen. Why would my energy suddenly "stagnate"?

Apparently, it can be related to stress in the past which manifests in the body later and last year was a tough time at work for me.

"A balanced diet and moderate intake of alcohol and coffee are also important," Simeen added, eyebrows raised as I totted up my weekly units.

The first session of acupuncture, which in my case aims to increase the bloodflow around the body, was amazing. Afterwards I had cramps in my abdomen and could almost feel the energy being stirred in my nether regions. I felt so energetic, in fact, I ran 10 kilometres that evening.

Subsequent sessions haven't produced such dramatic results, but I am experiencing all the symptoms of PMS such as cramps and irritability. The herbs I take taste foul but include Dong Quai to regulate periods, Chi Shao to invigorate the blood, Xiang Fu to regulate liver chi and Zhie Yao to stir up stagnant energy.

Amazingly, my periods started six weeks later and have been regular ever since.

I'd never have imagined that I'd be so glad to have a period again.

To contact Sen call 020 7629 2243 or visit www.senhealth.com. Consultations start from £50 an hour. Acupuncture starts at £15 for 15 minutes. For more information on the BEST System call Biotech Health 01730 233414 or visit www.biotechhealth.com. A full 2-hour BEST Screening costs £135.00.



ANCIENT WAY Claire take Chinese herb to help restart periods stopped by the pill

Picture: AUSTIN HARGRAVE