

## Impacts of recent combined oral contraceptive shortages on users in Aotearoa New Zealand

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**Background:** There have been several shortages of various combined oral contraceptives (COC) in Aotearoa New Zealand in recent years, most recently during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This study sought to hear experiences from affected users.

**Methods:** Participants were recruited through poster advertising in various medical settings, and through unpaid/unsponsored posts in specific Facebook settings. Participants were recruited from March 2021 to January 2022. Ten semi-structured interviews took place, and general inductive analysis was undertaken with a feminist approach using NVivo. Common themes have been summarized below.

**Results:** Major themes identified were prescriber ignorance, accessibility, communication, impact on body and mind, and impact minimisation by users.

Prescriber ignorance includes prescribers who were unaware of the shortage and/or changes to funded brands, or responded poorly to issues that arose due to shortages or funded brand changes. Poor responses included not discussing prescription changes with users, or insufficient knowledge about differences within the COC drug class. Accessibility covered issues ranging from restrictive pharmacy hours making it difficult to pick up prescriptions, through long GP waiting times, to cost. Nine participants liked the idea, if it were an option, of receiving up to a 12-month supply at a time. Lack of communication throughout the healthcare delivery system became evident. Impacts due to short supply or brand/formulation changes included menstrual (breakthrough bleeding, loss of cycle control, dysmenorrhoea), acne, stress, anxiety, mental health disturbances, and a few participants stopping the pill for days to weeks (putting them at increased risk of unintended pregnancy, although this was not specified). When describing the impact of a shortage, several participants used language that actively minimised the effect a shortage had on them.

**Conclusion:** Shortages of the COC had profound and unexpected effects on some users, with unexpected themes relating to healthcare services delivery also found.

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