

**C**LUTCHING the pregnancy test I'd just done, I sent a silent wish to the universe: 'Please let it be negative.' When I dared to look I was relieved to see only one blue line. 'Don't worry, I'm not pregnant,' I texted my husband.

I've been on the Pill for more than 20 years and, like many women, rely on the packet to tell me which day I'm on.

Each blister pack comes with the days of the week marked on it. You typically take one pill a day for 21 days, then have a seven-day break before starting a new pack. If you forget to take that day's dose, there's a 24-hour catch-up window in which to take it.

But it's much harder when the packet is not in English, as I discovered recently. Shortly before Christmas, I renewed my yearly prescription for Mercilon, a type of combined Pill, which contains synthetic versions of oestrogen and progesterone.

After collecting my prescription — in two separate batches — I opened a pack from the first batch. Though the outer packaging looked normal, I couldn't work out where Friday was, because there was no Friday on the blister pack.

Instead, I had 'ZO, MA, DI, WO, DO, VR, ZA', which I later discovered was Dutch (MA is short for *Maandag* or Monday). In the second batch, the blister pack was printed with: 'Sab, Dom, 2a, 3a, 4a, 5a, 6a.'

The pharmacist told me there was no mix-up — chemists can source supplies from anywhere in the European Union and so half of my Pills came from the Netherlands, half from Portugal.

Stunned, I insisted he provide me with English pills, but he said they were perfectly legal products.

Eventually, he agreed to contact my GP, obtain a new prescription and call his wholesalers to find an English supply. Unfortunately, this wouldn't happen before my month-long trip to Australia in December.

With long journeys, stopovers, different time zones and no knowledge of Dutch or Portuguese, I returned home worrying I was carrying more than just jetlag — we

# Taking the Pill? You might need to know the Dutch word for Monday

By JOANNE CHRISTIE

live in a tiny one-bedroom flat and I definitely don't want a baby at the moment.

I soon discovered my experience was all too common. On web forums, women would ask what the symbols on their pill pack meant. And my friend Lauren describes the six months she was forced to use a foreign supply of Yasmin, another brand, as 'so nerve-racking as I kept having to count backwards to check I hadn't forgotten a day'.

Occasionally, she took an extra

pill from a new pack, just in case. We had received parallel imports — drugs that are imported from other EU countries because it's cheaper to source them outside the UK. And the practice is likely to have become more common as, in recent years, the pound surged in value against the euro.

Stuart Gale, the chief pharmacist and owner of the Frosts Pharmacy Group, says they rarely use parallel imports, but adds: 'From a financial point of view, many pharmacists are forced to — we dispense most branded medications at a loss and if it's an expensive medication it can be a big loss.'

The Department of Health recently wrote to pharmacies outlining a 6 per cent reduction in

their 2016/17 funding, which Stuart Gale says could result in more foreign imports for people taking regular medication.

I sent my Mercilon packaging to the Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), which confirmed the batches were approved products.

A spokesperson told me an imported product must be 'therapeutically equivalent' to the UK product and that 'information on its safe effective use' should be presented in English.

This includes on the leaflet, the box and the 'immediate packaging', such as a blister strip or bottle.

However, she added: 'If the product is in a sealed pouch, then a label carrying the information is

applied to the pouch, as opening it to apply a label to the immediate packaging will affect the shelf life of the medicine.'

As with many contraceptive pills, my packs of Mercilon have always contained blister strips that are individually packaged within a sealed foil pouch.

This meant there was no requirement for the calendar pack to be translated into English.

But given that the Pill is said to be 99 per cent effective with 'perfect use', but only 91 per cent effective with 'typical' use, surely it would help women if the packets are in their own language?

Failure to stick to a routine is one of the biggest reasons people have problems with most medications, and non-English parallel imports are a contributing factor, says Sultan Dajani, a community pharmacist and spokesperson for the Royal Pharmaceutical Society.

**A**NTIDEPRESSANTS, hormone replacement therapy and blood pressure medication often come in calendar packs, too, so could potentially be affected by the same problem. And it's not just the blister packs that may potentially cause difficulties.

'It is good practice that all foreign boxes have an English leaflet, but it doesn't always happen and sometimes the English is poor or in very small writing,' says Sultan Dajani.

However, while foreign medicines may be 'a bit unprofessional', he says they 'stop the cost to the NHS spiralling into meltdown'.

'It's a delicate balancing act between being the gatekeeper for the NHS in providing these parallel imports and ensuring patients get the best out of their medicines.'

I'm all for saving the NHS money, but not at the expense of an accidental pregnancy. The next time I renew my prescription, I'll make it clear I want it in English.