



The Facts on Emergency Contraception

Despite the many highly effective birth control options women have to choose from, none is 100% perfect. And sometimes, mistakes happen – a condom breaks, a woman forgets to take her pill. Or she has sex when she didn't plan to – or want to. Each year, there are about 3 million unintended pregnancies in the United States – just over half occur among women who are using a regular method of contraception.¹ Emergency contraception (EC) gives women a second chance to prevent pregnancy in the first few days after sex.

What is Emergency Contraception (EC)?

Emergency contraception (EC) is a safe, effective back-up birth control method that can prevent pregnancy after unprotected intercourse or the failure of other birth control methods. The most common form of EC is emergency contraceptive pills, which contain concentrated dosages of the same hormones found in daily birth control pills – either progestin alone or a combination of estrogen and progestin. When taken within the first few days of unprotected intercourse, EC can reduce the risk of pregnancy by up to 89%.²

EC is not a substitute for correct use of regular contraceptives. It is less effective than regular contraception, and provides no protection from HIV/AIDS or sexually transmitted diseases. EC will not work if a woman is already pregnant and EC will not cause birth defects if a woman takes it when she is already pregnant. EC will not affect a woman's chance of becoming pregnant in the future.

Is EC the Same Thing as the “Morning-After Pill”?

Because EC can help reduce the risk of pregnancy after sex, some people like to call it the “morning-after pill.” Actually, labels for the FDA-approved products say EC should be used within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse and recent research shows this window can be extended to 120 hours, or 5 days.³ However, there is no reason to delay treatment; the sooner, the better.

How Do Emergency Contraceptive Pills Work?

EC prevents pregnancy the same way that regular birth control pills do: by delaying or inhibiting ovulation, inhibiting fertilization, or preventing implantation of a fertilized egg in the uterus.^{4,5} All of these events occur before the beginning of pregnancy, which

medical science defines as the implantation of a fertilized egg in the lining of a woman's uterus; implantation typically begins five to seven days after fertilization.⁶ EC will not work if a woman is pregnant.

Is EC the Same Thing as the “Abortion Pill”?

EC should not be confused with Mifeprex®, also known as RU-486. EC and Mifeprex® are completely different drugs. EC helps to prevent pregnancy, while Mifeprex® terminates an early pregnancy.

What Kinds of Emergency Contraceptive Pills are Available in the U.S.?

There are now two new EC products, Plan B® One-Step and Next Choice™ (generic EC). There are also about a dozen brands of daily birth control pills that can also be used as emergency contraception (see www.not-2-late.com for a complete list), however, using multiple doses of daily birth control pills has been shown to be less effective than using Plan B® One-Step and Next Choice™ and may also cause more side effects, like nausea and vomiting.

How Should a Woman Take Emergency Contraception?

The Plan B® One-Step tablet contains a single 1.5 mg of levonorgestrel dose and should be taken as soon as possible within 72 hours (3 days) of unprotected intercourse. Next Choice™ packets contain two tablets, each containing 0.75 mg levonorgestrel. According to FDA-approved labeling, the first tablet should be taken as soon as possible within 72 hours (3 days) of unprotected intercourse. The second tablet must be taken 12 hours later. New research shows that one ‘double dose’ (taking both Next Choice™ tablets at one time) is as effective as two doses taken 12 hours apart. These data also show that EC can still reduce the risk of pregnancy when taken four or five days (up to 120 hours) after unprotected, but the sooner EC is taken, the better it works.

How effective is Emergency Contraception?

Emergency Contraception, when used correctly, can reduce the risk of pregnancy by 89% after a single act of unprotected sex. Effectiveness declines as the interval between intercourse and the start of treatment increases. In the first 24 hours after intercourse, Emergency Contraception can prevent 95% of expected pregnancies.⁷

What are the side effects of Emergency Contraception?

Some women experience one or more side effects after taking Emergency Contraception. Side effects may include nausea, vomiting, cramping, fatigue, headache, dizziness, breast tenderness, and menstrual changes. Plan B® One-Step and Next Choice™ tend to cause fewer side effects than combination pills. Research has shown that progestin-only EC reduces the incidence of nausea by about one half and vomiting by two thirds, in

comparison to combination pills. No serious complications have been associated with Emergency Contraception. When used as directed, EC is safe for most women.

Where Can Women Get EC?

Adults - Women and men age 17 or older who have government-issued ID (driver's license, state ID, passport, green card, etc.), can buy EC at the pharmacy, where it is sold under the brand names Plan B[®] One-Step and Next Choice[™]. Emergency contraception is kept behind-the-counter so you will need to ask the pharmacist for a pack and present your identification in order to obtain it.

Teens - Young women under age 17 still need a prescription from a doctor or other health care provider in order to buy EC at the pharmacy, **except in a few states** which have special pharmacy access legislation. Women who live in **AK, CA, HI, MA, ME, NH, NM, VT and WA**, can get EC directly from a local pharmacy regardless of their age.

Remember, the sooner you take EC the better it works. So if you're under 17 and need to get a prescription for EC, contact your health care provider's office right away. Some providers might ask you to come in for a visit, while others might be able to call in a prescription for you. If you don't have a health care provider, visit the Emergency Contraception website: www.not-2-late.com (also available in [English](#), [Spanish](#), [French](#) or [Arabic](#)).

Where Can Women Get More Information?

The EC Website, www.not-2-late.com, offers information, FAQs and local resources about where to get EC in your area.

¹ Henshaw SK. Unintended Pregnancy in the United States. Family Planning Perspectives 1998, 30: 24-29.

² Task Force on Postovulatory Methods of Fertility Regulation. Randomized controlled trial of levonorgestrel versus the Yuzpe regimen of combined oral contraceptives for emergency contraception. The Lancet 1998, 352: 428-433.

³ von Hertzen, H. et al. Low dose mifepristone and two regimens of levonorgestrel for emergency contraception: a WHO multicentre randomized trial. The Lancet, 7 December 2002: 1803-1810.

⁴ Glasier A. Emergency postcoital contraception. New England Journal of Medicine 1997, 337:1058-1064.

⁵ Trussell J and Raymond EG. Statistical evidence concerning the mechanism of action of the Yuzpe regimen of emergency contraception. Obstetrics and Gynecology, 1999, 93: 872-876.

⁶ The United States Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46, Subpart B, Section 46.202, Subsection (f) states "Pregnancy encompasses the period of time from implantation until delivery."

⁷ Piaggio, G et al, Timing off emergency contraception with levonorgestrel or the Yuzpe regimen. The Lancet 1999; 353:721.