



Prescribe Choice: Understanding Emergency Contraception

What is Emergency Contraception (EC)?

Emergency contraception (EC) is a method of **preventing** pregnancy **after** unprotected sexual intercourse—when a condom breaks, after a sexual assault, or any time unprotected sexual intercourse occurs. EC **does not** protect against sexually transmitted infections. EC pills are often called “morning after pills” but can be taken up to 120 hours after unprotected intercourse, although they are most effective when taken within 24 hours.

Different Types of Emergency Contraception Pills

Until recently, there have been two types of pre-packaged pills, Plan B and Preven. Plan B contains the hormone progestin and is more effective than Preven, which contains the hormones estrogen and progestin. Additionally, Plan B causes fewer side effects such as nausea and vomiting. Preven was recently discontinued, but may still be on some pharmacy shelves for a limited period of time.

In addition to Plan B and Preven, there are 12 brands of birth control pills that can prevent pregnancy when used as EC. The doses of birth control pills vary, so it is important to check with a health care provider to make sure that the correct brand and dosage are used. For information about brands of oral contraceptives that can be used as emergency contraception and to find a provider in your area, visit: www.not-2-late.com.

How does EC Work?

While most effective if taken within 24 hours, EC can be taken up to 120 hours after unprotected intercourse, not just the next morning. The hormones in EC can delay or prevent ovulation, interfere with fertilization or implantation. Neither a pelvic examination nor a pregnancy test is required before treatment.

EC is Extremely Safe and Effective

When taken within 24 hours of unprotected intercourse, EC is up to 95% effective. Overall, EC pills lower a woman’s risk of becoming pregnant by 75-88%. EC has minimal side effects, the most common being nausea. However, anti-nausea medication can be taken an hour before the first dose of EC pills to reduce this side effect.

Advance Prescriptions of EC

Advance prescriptions offer women immediate access to EC pills, when the efficacy is greatest. Advance prescriptions also give women access to EC on weekends or outside regular doctor’s hours. However, only 20% of OB/GYNs report having discussed EC with patients during regular exams.

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EC Is Essential to Women's Health and Lives

Emergency contraception is an important backup method of birth control because it increases women's control over their reproduction. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, there are 3 million unintended pregnancies in the US each year. **EC has the potential to cut the number of unintended pregnancies in HALF and prevent thousands of abortions each year in the United States.**

Young Women Need Increased Access to EC

Many college health care centers and doctor's offices do not offer EC or are closed on the weekends, leaving women unable to find timely access to an EC provider. A survey conducted by the Feminist Majority Foundation in 2002 found that 61% of non-religious college health centers provide EC but of these only 16% had weekend access to EC and only 38% provide advance prescriptions.

Campaign to Win Over-the-Counter Status for EC

The Feminist Majority Foundation together with other women's rights and reproductive health groups are campaigning for the FDA to make emergency contraception pills available over-the-counter (OTC).

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has been delaying and denying over-the-counter (OTC) status for emergency contraception since April 21, 2003 when the first application was submitted for OTC status for Plan B. First the FDA delayed its decision by three months, then issued a "not approvable" letter to Barr Laboratories, makers of Plan B, in May 2004, indicating that Barr had not provided adequate data that the drug is safe for young women under the age of 16. This decision was despite the fact that the FDA's own expert advisory panels voted 23-4 in December 2003 to recommend approval for OTC status. Barr subsequently resubmitted its application with age restrictions, allowing for non-prescription access to EC for women 16 and older, and prescription-only access for women 15 and younger. The FDA missed its January 21, 2005 deadline, announcing it planned to delay its decision yet again.

Over-the-counter status of emergency contraception is supported by a wide-range of medical and women's health organizations, including the American Medical Association, American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, National Women's Health Network, and Black Women's Health Imperative.

To join the Feminist Majority Foundation's campaign to ensure that young women have greater access to emergency contraception, visit www.ECOvertheCounter.org.