

Emergency Contraception



More than half of all pregnancies in the United States are not planned. We forget to take our pills. Condoms break. We have sex when we didn't expect to—or want to. If you have sex without using birth control, and you don't want to be pregnant, you may want to use emergency contraception to keep from becoming pregnant.

What is emergency contraception?

Emergency contraception is any method of birth control that prevents pregnancy after you have sex. There are a few methods that work well and have been tested scientifically. You can take emergency contraception pills (ECPs) or have an intrauterine device (IUD) put in your uterus (womb). Sometimes ECPs are called “morning-after pills,” but you have longer than the morning after sex to take them.

What emergency contraception pills can I take?

The most common ECP contains a hormone (levonorgestrel) that also is found in birth control pills. The brand names for this ECP are Plan B and Next Choice. You can buy this ECP in a drugstore if you are 17 years or older, but you need a prescription if you are younger than 17 years. You will take 1 or 2 pills, depending on what brand you get. It is best if you take this ECP within 3 days of unprotected sex. You can take this ECP up to 5 days after having unprotected sex, and it will still prevent most pregnancies. It works better the sooner you take it.

A newer ECP is available only with a prescription for women of all ages. The brand name is ella. This medicine uses a different drug but still has the same effect on your body. You can take it up to 5 days after unprotected sex, and it prevents pregnancy very well. This ECP may work better than the other ECPs if you are overweight.

You also can use regular birth control pills as ECPs as long as they contain both of the hormones estrogen and progestin. If you use regular birth control pills as ECPs, you will have to take several pills at one time. It is best if you use regular birth control as ECPs within 3 days of unprotected sex. You can take them up to 5 days after having unprotected sex, but they work better the sooner you take them.

What if I do not want to take a pill?

A different method of emergency contraception is having an IUD put in your uterus. This is very effective (99%) in preventing pregnancy. You can get an IUD put in during a regular office visit. It is not a special procedure. It should be placed within 5 days of unprotected intercourse. An IUD has to be put in by a health care provider. This might be a good option if you want a long-term form of birth control that works well.

How does emergency contraception work?

We do not know exactly how emergency contraception works. Most likely, it stops you from having an egg available. It may make it harder for sperm to reach the egg. If the egg and the sperm do get together, emergency contraception may prevent the fertilized egg from staying in the uterus. Emergency contraception will not stop a pregnancy that is already growing in the uterus.

Is emergency contraception safe?

Yes, emergency contraception is very safe. Even women who cannot take birth control pills can safely use ECPs.

Are there any side effects of emergency contraception pills?

The most common side effect of ECPs is nausea that lasts a day or so and, rarely, vomiting. Your health care provider can give you a prescription for medicine to prevent nausea. If you do not have a prescription, you can use over-the-counter motion sickness or nausea medicine. You may get a headache, too. Your period may be different during the cycle you take ECPs. It could be a little heavy and longer or come a little earlier or later than normal. The side effects usually are mild and go away quickly. You will probably have the least side effects if you take ella instead of the other ECP options. You are more likely to have side effects like nausea and vomiting with these ECPs than the other ECP options.

I do not have sex very often. Can I use emergency contraception pills instead of regular birth control?

Emergency contraception is not as effective as regular birth control methods. If used at the perfect time, emergency contraception is 75% to 99% effective. Regular birth control pills or the shot (Depo-Provera) are up to 99% effective.

How do I get emergency contraception pills if I am 17 years old or older?

You can get ECPs called Plan B or Next Choice at a pharmacy without a prescription if you are 17 years or older. You may need to show proof of your age. These medicines are kept behind the pharmacist's counter so you can ask for them and talk to the pharmacist if you need more information before using them. If you want to take ella, you will need to get a prescription from your health care provider.

How do I get emergency contraception pills if I am under age 17?

Ask your health care provider for a prescription to have on hand in case you need it. If you are afraid to ask your health care provider, call the local Planned Parenthood (1-800-230-PLAN). You can use some kinds of regular birth control pills as emergency contraception. There is information at the end of this handout that tells how to do this.

If I do get pregnant, will emergency contraception pills hurt the baby?

There is no risk of birth defects or harm to the baby by taking ECPs even if you are pregnant already or get pregnant this month.

How do I use Plan B, Next Choice, or ella for emergency contraception?

Step 1: Take your first pill as soon as you can after you have sex. It works better that way. You can take the first dose up to 5 days after you have sex, but the sooner you take the pill, the more likely you are to prevent pregnancy.

Step 2: If you have 2 pills, you can either take both pills at the same time or take your second dose 12 hours after the first dose. If you are worried that you might not be able to take 2 pills 12 hours apart or that you might forget to take the second dose, go ahead and take both pills together.

Step 3: If your period does not come in 3 weeks, get a pregnancy test.

How do I use birth control pills for emergency contraception?

If you are going to use birth control pills for emergency contraception *you have to take 2 doses 12 hours apart*. The number and color pill you need to take is different, depending on the type of birth control pills you are using. See <http://ec.princeton.edu/questions/dose.html> for a list of the number of pills you need to take for the type of birth control pills you have. You may want to take an over-the-counter motion sickness or nausea medicine with the birth control pills.

Step 1: You must take the right amount of pills for each dose. You must also take the right color pills.

Step 2: Take the same number of the same color pills 12 hours after the first dose.

Step 3: If your period does not come in 3 weeks, get a pregnancy test.

What do I do after taking ECPs?

You will be able to get pregnant again shortly after taking ECPs. You may want to use a barrier method, like condoms, until your period comes. You also should make sure you have a reliable form of birth control to keep you from getting pregnant in the future. This way if you have sex when you do not plan to, you are still protected. Talk to your health care provider or go to your local Planned Parenthood to discuss the birth control options available to you.

How do I use an intrauterine device for emergency contraception?

A health care provider has to put in an IUD. One advantage of the IUD is that you will have effective birth control that lasts up to 10 years. When you call for an appointment, be sure to tell them that you want the IUD for emergency contraception so you get the appointment scheduled within 5 days of having unprotected sex.

For More Information

Emergency Contraception Web Site

<http://ec.princeton.edu/>

Planned Parenthood

1-800-230-PLAN (1-800-230-7526)

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

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