

What You Should Know About Emergency Contraception

Uh-oh! You had sex and the condom broke. Or, you were on a romantic weekend in the country and your birth control pills stayed home. This is a good time to know about emergency contraception (EC).

Two Types of Emergency Contraception

Oral EC contains a dose of the hormones used in regular oral contraceptives (OCs). Since they are used after unprotected sex to decrease the likelihood of pregnancy, ECs are sometimes called “morning after pills.” Do not confuse EC with mifepristone (RU-486), the medication used to induce abortion. This is a completely different product. In fact, EC will not work if you are already pregnant.

One brand of oral tablets in the United States, called Plan B, is made specifically for EC. Plan B is now available without a prescription for women aged 18 years and older. Although it is an over-the-counter (OTC) product, you will not find it on pharmacy shelves but must request it from a pharmacist. Women who are younger than age 18 years will still need a prescription from a health care provider.

In addition to Plan B, some—but not all—traditional OCs can also be used as EC. Emergency contraception use is safe in most women, even those who have been told they cannot use OCs.

Emergency contraception is more effective the sooner it is taken after unprotected sex. Since some pharmacies have restricted hours, may not stock EC, or may be reluctant to dispense it, it may be a good idea to obtain it in advance “just in case.” If there is only one pharmacy in your area, and that pharmacy doesn’t stock or refuses to dispense EC, you can ask your health care pro-

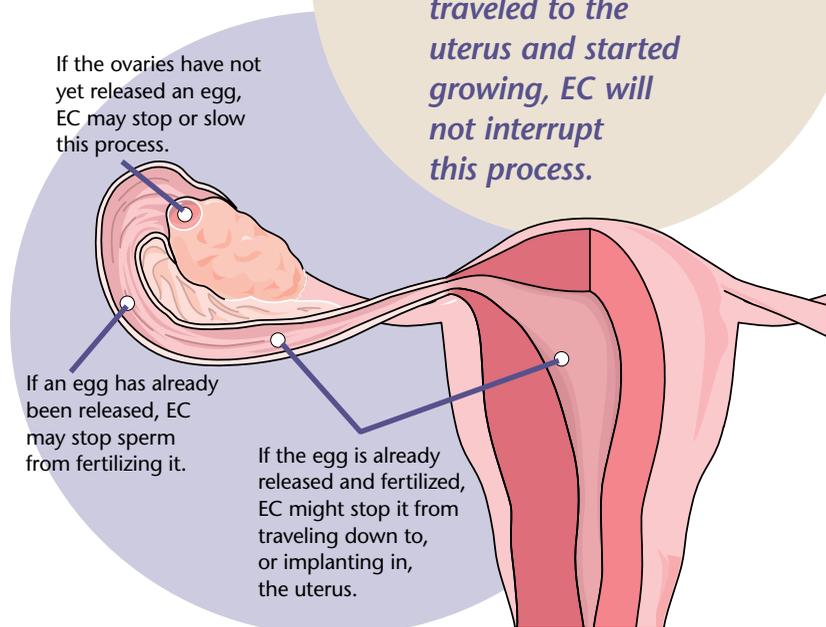
vider for a prescription for one of the traditional OCs that can be used for EC.

The copper-bearing intrauterine device (IUD) is also an effective method of EC. Unlike oral EC, it provides up to 10 years of future contraception, and can be removed any time before then if you wish to become pregnant.

How Emergency Contraception Works

Oral EC works in several different ways, depending on what point you are at in your menstrual cycle. If the ovaries have not yet released an egg (ovulated), EC may stop or slow this process. If an egg has already been released, EC may stop sperm from fertilizing it. If the egg is already released and fertilized, EC might stop it from traveling down to, or implanting in, the uterus. Again, EC does not cause an abortion. If a fertilized egg has already traveled to the uterus and started growing, EC will not interrupt this process.

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Emergency Contraception

The copper-bearing IUD does not prevent the ovaries from releasing an egg. It stops sperm from fertilizing an egg and may also prevent a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus.

Instructions for Using Emergency Contraception

Oral Emergency Contraception.—If you are using Plan B, you will be instructed to take the first tablet up to 72 hours after unprotected sex and the second tablet exactly 12 hours later. However, studies show that EC works just as well if you take both tablets at the same time, and that they work even if taken up to 5 days after

unprotected sex. The sooner you take the pills, though, the more effective they are at preventing pregnancy.

If you are using traditional OCs for EC, you should follow your health care provider's instructions. Depending on the brand, you may be instructed to take three to five pills as soon as possible after unprotected sex and then take the same number of pills exactly 12 hours later.

Plan B or progestin-only pills are slightly more effective than estrogen/progestin-containing OCs; they are also less likely to cause nausea and vomiting, common side effects of oral EC. Before taking oral EC, you may take an OTC motion sickness pill (meclizine) to prevent nausea. If you throw up within 1 hour after taking oral EC, some researchers recommend taking another dose to be sure enough of the medicine was absorbed into your bloodstream.

If you do not wish to become pregnant any time in the next few years, or if you don't want any more children, the copper-bearing IUD might be an option for you.

Resources

- The Emergency Contraception Web site
<http://www.not-2-late.com/>
- Planned Parenthood
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>
- The National Women's Health Information Center
<http://www.4woman.gov/faq/econtracep.htm>

Within a month of taking oral EC, you should experience some bleeding—spotting, or a regular period—even if it's earlier or later than expected. If you don't start bleeding, you should take a pregnancy test. Remember, EC is very effective at preventing pregnancy, but it is not 100% effective.

There are no known harmful effects of using EC, even if you use it more than once. However, repeated or frequent use (particularly of the method containing both estrogen and progestin) does expose you to doses of hormones much higher than those contained in OCs. But if you are using EC repeatedly, you should think about the reasons and circumstances why. Emergency contraception is not as effective as most methods of birth control used before or during sex.

The Intrauterine Device.—If you do not wish to become pregnant any time in the next few years, or if you don't want any more children, the copper-bearing IUD might be an option for you. For EC, the IUD must be inserted within 5 days of unprotected sex. If you call your health care provider for emergency IUD insertion, explain the situation. Some Planned Parenthood clinics can schedule you promptly for emergency IUD insertion.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

Emergency contraception does not prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs). If you have had unprotected sex, including forced sex, you should consider getting tested for STIs and/or taking medication to help prevent them.

In Summary

Learning about EC before you might need it and having EC on hand “just in case” can protect you against an unintended pregnancy. Plan B, labeled for EC use, is now available without a prescription for women aged 18 years and older. To find out more about EC, including locating a health care provider in your area who can prescribe it for you, see the Emergency Contraception Web site.

This Patient Handout was prepared by Diane E. Judge, APN/CNP, using materials from The Emergency Contraception Web site.