



You may have never heard of it, but emergency contraception (EC) has the potential to prevent up to 1.7 million unintended pregnancies (and 800,000 abortions) in the U.S. each year. Below are the facts on what EC is, how it works and where to find it.

What is emergency contraception (EC)?

EC contains hormones similar to ordinary birth control pills. EC is often called the “morning-after pill,” but this term can be misleading because women can take EC up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sex.

What kind of EC is available in the United States?

Plan B[®] is the only type of dedicated emergency contraceptive product currently available. (Preven[™] is now off the market.) Certain brands and dosages of daily birth control pills also have been approved by the FDA for use as EC. In August 2006, the FDA approved Plan B for over-the-counter, non-prescription sale to women 18 and older; women under 18 still need a prescription to receive Plan B.

How does EC work?

EC works primarily by delaying ovulation (i.e., delaying the ovary from releasing an egg.) It also can work by inhibiting the transport of the egg or sperm or changing the lining of the uterus so that a fertilized egg cannot implant.

Is EC the same thing as the “abortion pill?”

NO. EC should not be confused with mifepristone (RU 486), which is commonly known as the “abortion pill” or “medical abortion.” EC *prevents* pregnancy, while medical abortion *terminates* an early pregnancy. EC will not work if a pregnancy is already established. If a woman is already pregnant and takes EC, the pregnancy will continue without harmful effects.

Why would a woman use EC?

There are many instances when a woman may need emergency contraception. Some examples include:

- ✓ The condom broke or slipped off.
- ✓ The woman forgot to take her birth control pills or started the pack late.
- ✓ The man didn't pull out in time or he ejaculated on the outside of the woman's vagina.
- ✓ The woman was sexually assaulted/raped.

How effective is EC?

Although EC is not 100% effective, it can reduce a woman's chance of becoming pregnant by 75-89% when taken within 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sex. Remember, it is more effective the sooner it is taken! The first 12-24 hours are the most crucial. Women should keep an extra pack of Plan B in their medicine cabinets, just in case. Plan B has a shelf life of up to 3 years, so a woman should check the expiration date on the package before using.

Are there any side effects associated with EC?

Some women using EC may experience temporary side effects, which include nausea, vomiting, headaches, dizziness and breast tenderness. There are no known long-term side effects.

Where can a woman find EC?

Women 18 years of age and older can request Plan B from their local pharmacy. If their local pharmacy does not stock Plan B, they should ask for a referral to a pharmacy that does carry Plan B to avoid any delays in obtaining the time-sensitive medication. For women under the age of 18, any physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner or nurse midwife can write a prescription for EC. NARAL Pro-Choice Colorado has published *The Emergency Contraception (EC) Resource Handbook for Colorado*, a bilingual (English/Spanish) directory of more than 300 health care providers and pharmacies where women can obtain or fill prescriptions for EC. The guide can be ordered and/or downloaded from our Web site at www.ProChoiceColorado.org.