

Emergency Contraception

Emergency contraception refers to birth control methods that prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex. Emergency contraception may be recommended:

- When a condom breaks.
- After a sexual assault.
- If you forgot to take your birth control pill.
- If you used inadequate contraception during sex.

Emergency contraception is most effective if used as soon as possible after sex. It is important to note that it does not protect against STIs (*sexually transmitted infections*). **Do not** use emergency contraception as your only form of birth control.

Types of emergency contraceptives

Emergency contraception must be used as soon as possible after having unprotected sex and within 5 days after the sex. The sooner you use emergency contraception after unprotected sex, the more effective it is. The following types of emergency contraception are available:

- Hormonal pills that work by preventing the ovaries from releasing an egg (*ovulation*) and preventing fertilization of an egg. There are two types of hormonal pills:
 - A pill that contains high doses of estrogen and progesterone.
 - A pill that contains only progesterone. This may be a single pill or two pills taken 12–24 hours apart.
- A nonhormonal pill that works by preventing progesterone from having its normal effect on ovulation and the lining of the uterus (*endometrium*). A prescription for this medicine is usually required.
- A nonhormonal medical device that is inserted into the uterus (*copper intrauterine device, IUD*). The copper in the IUD causes the sperm to be less able to fertilize the egg. A health care provider must insert the IUD.



Most types of emergency contraceptive pills are available without a prescription or a visit with your health care provider. If you are younger than 17, you may need a prescription. Talk with your pharmacist about your options.

Side effects

Ask your health care provider about the possible side effects of emergency contraceptives. Side effects may include:

- Abdominal pain and cramps.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Breast tenderness.
- Headache.
- Dizziness.
- Tiredness (*fatigue*).
- Irregular bleeding or spotting.

If you take emergency contraceptive pills while you are pregnant, it will not end your pregnancy or harm your baby.

Follow these instructions at home:

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Eat something before taking the emergency contraception pills to help prevent nausea.
- If you feel tired or dizzy, rest until you feel better.
- If you used a hormonal emergency contraceptive pill, continue using your normal method of birth control. Be sure to use a barrier method (such as condoms) for contraception for at least 7 days.
- If you used the nonhormonal emergency contraceptive pill, do not go back to your normal hormonal contraception pills for at least 5 days after taking the emergency contraceptive. Be sure to use a barrier method (such as condoms) for contraception until the next menstrual period.

Contact a health care provider if:

- You vomit within 3 hours after taking a pill. You may need to take another pill.
- You have a severe headache.
- You have vaginal bleeding that does not stop.
- It has been 21 days since you took an emergency contraception pill and you have not had a menstrual period.

Get help right away if:

- You have chest pain.
- You have leg pain.
- You have numbness or weakness of your arms or legs.
- You have slurred speech.
- You have visual problems.

These symptoms may represent a serious problem that is an emergency. Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away. Get medical help right away. Call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.). Do not drive yourself to the hospital.

Summary

- Emergency contraceptives prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex.
- Emergency contraception will not work if you are already pregnant and will not harm the baby if you are pregnant.
- Some emergency contraceptives are available from your local pharmacy without a prescription.
- Talk to your health care provider about the type of emergency contraceptives that are best for you.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.