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## Emergency Contraception



**Emergency contraception** is used to prevent a woman from getting pregnant after she has had sex without using birth control, if her current method fails, or if she is raped. There are two forms of emergency contraception available in the United States: 1) emergency contraceptive pills and 2) the copper ***intrauterine device (IUD)***.

This pamphlet explains

- the different types of emergency contraception
- how to get the various types of emergency contraception
- side effects, safety, and possible complications
- follow-up care you may need

### About Emergency Contraception

If a woman is raped, has sex without using a birth control method, or if she thinks her

method did not work, she may want to use emergency contraception. Emergency contraception reduces the risk that pregnancy will occur. Some common situations in

which emergency contraception could be used are if a woman forgot to take several birth control pills, a condom broke or slipped off, or a diaphragm or cervical cap became dislodged.

Although emergency contraception is a good option for preventing pregnancy when a woman has unprotected sex, regular use of a birth control method (such as an IUD or the birth control implant) is more effective for preventing pregnancy.

Table 1. Emergency Contraception Pills		
Type	Availability	How to Use
Progestin-only pills		
Single Pill	Available by prescription only for women younger than 17 years, and available without a prescription for women 17 years and older.	Take one pill as soon as possible within 72 hours and up to 120 hours of unprotected sex. If vomiting occurs within 2 hours of taking the pill, contact your health care provider about taking another pill.
Two Pills	Available by prescription only for women younger than 17 years, and available without a prescription for women 17 years and older.	Take one pill as soon as possible within 72 hours and up to 120 hours of unprotected sex. Take the second pill 12–24 hours after the first pill. If vomiting occurs within 2 hours of taking either dose, contact your health care provider about whether you need to repeat that dose.
Combination birth control pills	Available by prescription only	Exact dosages vary with different types of pills. Take first dose within 72 hours and up to 120 hours of unprotected sex. Take second dose 12 hours after the first. If vomiting occurs within 2 hours of taking either dose, contact your health care provider about whether you need to repeat that dose.
Ulipristal	Available by prescription only	Take one pill as soon as possible within 120 hours of unprotected sex. If vomiting occurs within 3 hours of taking the pill, contact your health care provider about taking another

		pill.
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### Types of Emergency Contraceptive Pills

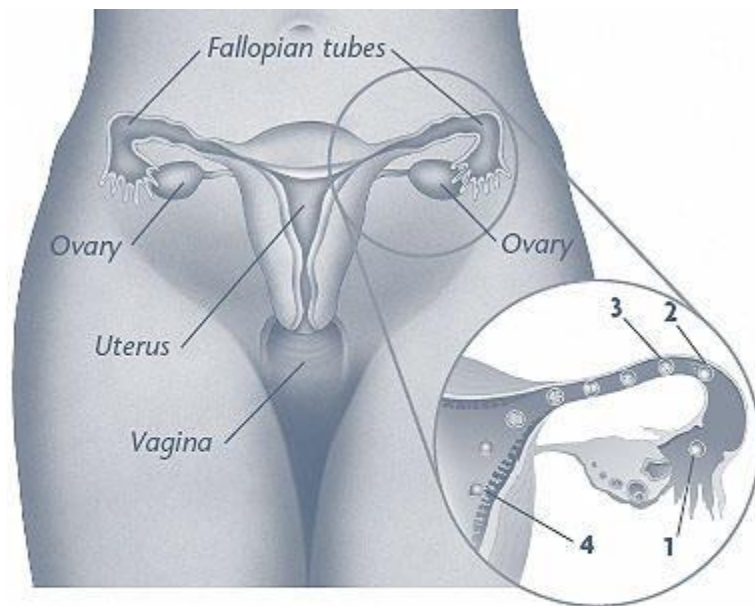
Emergency contraceptive pills are the most frequently used form of emergency contraception in the United States. There are three types of emergency contraceptive pills: 1) **progestin**-only pills, 2) combination pills, and 3) ulipristal.

#### *Progestin-Only Pills*

Progestin is a **hormone** commonly found in birth control pills and other forms of hormonal birth control. Progestin-only emergency contraception pills are available as a single pill or two pills that are taken 12–24 hours apart. The pills should be started as soon as possible after having unprotected sex ([Table 1](#)). They are about 75% effective in preventing pregnancy. Their effectiveness decreases with time. They are most effective when taken within 72 hours (3 days) of unprotected sex. They are moderately effective when taken within 120 hours (5 days).

Progestin-only pills are thought to prevent pregnancy mainly by preventing **ovulation**. They will not work if you are already pregnant and will not affect a pregnancy that has started. Progestin-only pills can be used more than once, even within the same menstrual cycle.

#### How Pregnancy Occurs



*Each month during ovulation an egg is released (1) and moves into one of the fallopian tubes. If a woman has sex around this time, and an egg and sperm meet in the fallopian tube (2), the two may join. If they join (3), the fertilized egg then moves through the fallopian tube into the uterus and becomes attached there to grow during pregnancy (4).*

### Combination Pills

Birth control pills that contain **estrogen** and progestin are called combination pills. Taken in higher-than-usual amounts, they can be used for emergency contraception. They are taken in two doses. The number of pills needed for emergency contraception is different for each brand of pill. Combination emergency contraceptive pills need to be taken as soon as possible up to 120 hours, or 5 days, after unprotected intercourse. They are thought to work by preventing ovulation.

A health care provider or pharmacist can tell you how many pills you should take for the type of birth control pills that you have. This information also is available at the web site <http://www.not-2-late.com>.

The risk of nausea and vomiting with combination emergency contraceptive pills is higher than that for progestin-only pills. A medication that helps prevent vomiting can be taken 1 hour before starting the first dose of combination pills. If you vomit within 2 hours of taking either

dose, contact your health care provider. You may need to repeat that dose.

Combination emergency contraceptive pills are not as effective in preventing pregnancy as the progestin-only pills. For this reason and because of the higher risk of nausea and vomiting, progestin-only methods are preferred over combination emergency contraceptive pills.

### Ulipristal

Ulipristal is a drug that affects how **progesterone** works in the body. It is thought to delay or prevent ovulation. It can be taken up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected

intercourse with no decrease in effectiveness. Ulipristal is available by prescription only. Research suggests that it may prevent more pregnancies than progestin-only pills when taken as directed.

Because the effects of repeated use of ulipristal are not yet known, it should be taken only once during a menstrual cycle. It also may decrease the effectiveness of hormonal birth control methods. For this reason, a nonhormonal method, such as a condom, should be used after taking ulipristal until your next period starts.

### **How to Get Emergency Contraception**

Ulipristal and combination birth control pills are available only by prescription. Both types of progestin-only pills can be bought at a pharmacy without a prescription if you are 17 years or older and by prescription if you are younger than 17 years. If you are younger than 17 years and need emergency contraception, call your health care provider's office or go to a family planning clinic. You also can go to <http://eclocator.not-2-late.com> or call the Emergency Contraception Hotline (888-NOT-2-LATE) to find a health care provider who can provide a prescription.

Some states—Alaska, California, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Vermont, and Washington State—allow pharmacists to dispense emergency contraceptive pills to women of any age. Also, many health care providers will give an advance prescription for emergency contraception. This way, you can always get emergency contraception if you need it.

It is a good idea to call the pharmacy ahead of time to make sure it has the brand of emergency contraception that you have been prescribed or that it has the over-the-counter product that you want. If the pharmacy does not carry it, try another.

### **Side Effects, Safety, and Complications**

Nausea and vomiting may occur after taking the progestin-only and combination pills. Your next period may not occur at the expected time. You may have bleeding or spotting in the week or month after the treatment. Other possible side effects include the following:

- Abdominal pain and cramps
- Breast tenderness
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Fatigue

These side effects usually go away within a few days.

The progestin-only pills and the combination birth control pills are safe even for women who normally are cautioned against using hormonal birth control methods. Emergency contraception is used for a much shorter period of time than regular use of a hormonal

birth control method. However, these pills should not be used as long-term birth control because frequent use of emergency contraception results in more side effects. These side effects may be harmful for women who cannot use combination birth control pills or progestin-only pills because of certain medical conditions.

Possible ulipristal side effects include headache, nausea, and abdominal pain. Your period may occur earlier or later than expected. Spotting may occur. Use of ulipristal as routine birth control or repeated use in the same menstrual cycle is not recommended.

### Follow-up Care

No other tests or procedures are needed after taking emergency contraception. However, you should see your health care provider for a pregnancy test if you have not had a period within a week of when you expect it. Progestin-only pills and combination pills do not harm a pregnancy or the health of the baby if you are already pregnant. Currently, there is little information about whether ulipristal can harm a pregnancy if you are already pregnant. See your health care provider if you have lower abdominal pain or if you have bleeding or spotting that lasts longer than a week. These can be signs of a ***miscarriage*** or ***ectopic pregnancy***.

It is possible to become pregnant later in the same menstrual cycle if you have used emergency contraception pills. To prevent pregnancy, you should use a barrier contraception method, such as a condom, until your next menstrual period occurs. You also can start birth control pills, the patch, or the vaginal ring immediately after taking emergency contraception, but you need to also use a barrier method until your next menstrual period starts. If you are interested in the hormonal IUD, the implant, or the birth control shot, these methods can be started after your next menstrual period. Talk to your health care provider about which form of birth control is best for you.

Keep in mind that emergency contraception does not prevent ***sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)***. If you are at risk of getting an STD, see your health care provider.

### The Copper IUD as Emergency Contraception

Another option for emergency contraception is to have a copper IUD inserted by your health care provider. The IUD must be inserted within 5 days of having unprotected sex. It is about 99% effective in preventing pregnancy. A benefit is that the IUD can then be used for long-term birth control. A drawback is that it does not protect against STDs. If you are at risk of STDs, a male or female condom should be used in addition to the IUD for STD protection. Also, some women with certain medical conditions cannot use an IUD.

### Finally...

If you are sexually active and want to prevent unwanted pregnancy, it is important to use birth control correctly every time you have sex. Ask your health care provider about a method of birth control that you can use regularly. Emergency contraception is

available if you have sex without birth control. It can greatly reduce the chance of pregnancy after unprotected sex.

## Glossary

**Ectopic Pregnancy:** A pregnancy in which the fertilized egg begins to grow in a place other than inside the uterus, usually in the fallopian tubes.

**Emergency Contraception:** Methods that are used to prevent pregnancy after a woman has had sex without birth control or after the method she used has failed. Emergency contraception methods include progestin-only pills, ulipristal, and birth control pills taken in specific amounts, or a copper intrauterine device. The pills must be taken within 120 hours to reduce the risk of pregnancy.

**Estrogen:** A female hormone produced in the ovaries.

**Hormones:** Substances produced by the body to control the functions of various organs.

**Intrauterine Device (IUD):** A small device that is inserted and left inside the uterus to prevent pregnancy.

**Miscarriage:** Early pregnancy loss.

**Ovulation:** The release of an egg from one of the ovaries.

**Progesterone:** A female hormone that is produced in the ovaries and that prepares the lining of the uterus for pregnancy.

**Progestin:** A synthetic form of progesterone that is similar to the hormone produced naturally by the body.

**Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD):** A disease that is spread by sexual contact, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital warts, herpes, syphilis, and infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS]).

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