

Emergency Contraception

Have a Back Up Plan for Your Birth Control



Emergency contraception (EC) can prevent pregnancy after you have had sex. The emergency contraceptive pill can help if you didn't use birth control or your birth control method failed to work. The brand name for these pills is "Plan B" because they are designed to back up your regular birth control method. The most common form of emergency contraception is a single pill made of a hormone called progestin.

Here is what you need to know before you use it:

1. Take it as soon as possible after unprotected sex.
2. You can take it up to 5 days after unprotected sex.

Where can you get emergency contraception?

You can buy EC from a Kaiser Permanente pharmacy or a drug store if you're 17 years of age or

older. If you're under 17, call your doctor or other healthcare provider to get a prescription for EC before you need it or as soon as possible after having had unprotected sex. You can get EC at no cost from a Kaiser Permanente pharmacy with a prescription from your provider.

How well does emergency contraception work?

The sooner you take EC after having had unprotected sex, the better it will work to prevent pregnancy. So, it is important to have it ahead of time, in case you need it. Once you take it, it is also important to use condoms or not have sex until you get your period.

If you take EC within 72 hours (3 days) after having had unprotected sex, the risk of getting pregnant is reduced by 89 percent. If you take EC within 5 days after having had unprotected sex, your risk of getting pregnant is reduced by 80 to 85 percent. This means that only 1 or 2 out of 100 women using EC will get pregnant compared to 8 out of 100 women who do not use EC after unprotected sex.

How does emergency contraception work?

Emergency contraception may prevent pregnancy in 3 ways:

1. EC may cause your body to delay releasing an egg (ovulation).
2. EC may stop the sperm from penetrating the egg (fertilization).
3. EC may stop a fertilized egg from attaching to the lining of the uterus (implantation).

EC will not cause an abortion if you are already pregnant. EC is not the RU-486 or the French abortion pill.

What are the advantages EC?

- EC helps prevent unwanted and mistimed pregnancies and abortions.
- EC is very safe. Even if you can't take birth control pills for medical reasons, you can usually use EC.
- You can and should ask for an EC prescription with refills before you need it so that you will have it just in case of an emergency. If you are taking a medication or have a medical condition that can be harmful to a pregnancy, ask your medical professional for a prescription for EC.
- EC is not an abortion pill and will not hurt a fetus if you are already pregnant.

Consider emergency contraception if you have . . .

- had a condom break, slip, or come off
- forgotten several birth control pills
- made love unexpectedly without birth control
- had your diaphragm or cervical cap slip out of place
- been late for your contraceptive injection and had unprotected sex
- been forced to have sex
- a partner who will not use or let you use birth control

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What are the disadvantages of EC?

- After taking EC, you may feel sick to your stomach or have a headache. Nausea is usually mild and should stop in a day or so. If you vomit within two hours after taking the pill, call your doctor or healthcare provider.
- You could have menstrual spotting or bleeding. Your breasts may feel tender.
- EC is not as effective as a regular birth control method, such as birth control pills or the Depo-Provera shot.
- You should not use EC over and over as your regular birth control because it will not work as well as other methods. But if you need to use EC more than once, it is not harmful.
- EC does not protect you against sexually transmitted diseases.
- It does not work after you are already pregnant.

What happens next?

Now is the time to plan a regular, more effective method of birth control. Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider about your birth control choices as soon as possible. Use condoms every time you have sex until you are able to get your regular birth control prescription. If you were using birth

control pills, or want to start using them, it is best to start taking them the day after you take EC. Since some birth control methods need to be started during your next period, it is important to call your doctor or other healthcare provider as soon as possible. If you are having problems with alcohol or drugs, or are in an abusive relationship that makes it difficult for you to regularly use birth control, please talk to your healthcare provider.

What about your menstrual cycle?

Your next menstrual period may start a few days earlier or later than usual. Menstrual bleeding may be heavier or lighter than usual. If your period doesn't start within 3 to 4 weeks, get a pregnancy test. You may be pregnant.

If you are having any unusual pain, bleeding, or vaginal discharge call your doctor or healthcare provider. These could be signs of an infection or other medical need.

What a relief! You got your period. Now what?

Again, make sure you always use an effective birth control method.

And remember to protect yourself against an unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), such as AIDS, by using condoms

correctly every time you have sex. You may have been exposed to a sexually transmitted disease if you have had sex without a condom. A common STD, chlamydia, may have no symptoms. Even though chlamydia can be cured, if left untreated it can cause internal scarring and possibly keep you from having a normal pregnancy in the future. You can call your doctor or healthcare provider to make an appointment to discuss STD testing.

Additional resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org.
- Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673).