



Emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) can prevent pregnancy after you have had sex. They 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 sooner you take ECPs after having had unprotected sex, the better they will work to prevent pregnancy. So, it is important to have them ahead of time, in case you need them. Once you take them, it is also important to use condoms or not have sex until you get your period.

If you take ECPs within 72 hours (3 days) after having had unprotected sex, the risk of getting pregnant is reduced by 89 percent. If you take ECPs 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 ECPs will

get pregnant compared to 8 out of 100 women who do not use ECPs after unprotected sex.

How do emergency contraceptive pills work?

ECPs are made of a hormone called progestin. They may prevent pregnancy in 3 ways:

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

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

What are the advantages of ECPs?

- ECPs help prevent unwanted and mistimed pregnancies and abortions.
- ECPs are very safe. Even if you can't take birth control pills for medical reasons, you can usually use ECPs.
- You can and should ask for an ECP prescription with refills before you need them so that you will have them 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 ECPs.
- ECPs are not abortion pills and will not hurt a fetus if you are already pregnant.

What are the disadvantages of ECPs?

- After taking ECPs, you may feel sick to your stomach or have a headache.
- You could have menstrual spotting or bleeding. Your breasts may feel tender.
- ECPs are not as effective as a regular birth control method, such as birth control pills or the Depo-Provera shot.
- You should not use ECPs over and over as your regular birth control because they will not work as well as other methods. But if you need to use ECPs more than once, they are not harmful.
- ECPs do not protect you against sexually transmitted diseases.
- They do not work after 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

Emergency Contraceptive Pills: Have a Back Up Plan for Your Birth Control

Where can you get emergency contraceptive pills?

You can buy ECPs from a Kaiser Permanente pharmacy or a drug store if you're over 18 years of age. If you're under 18, call your doctor or other healthcare provider to get a prescription for ECPs before you need them or as soon as possible after having had unprotected sex. You can get ECPs at no cost from a Kaiser Permanente pharmacy with a prescription from your provider.

How do you take emergency contraceptive pills?

Your package of emergency contraception contains 2 pills. We recommend that you take both pills at once. The package directions say to take 1 pill 12 hours apart. Studies have shown that taking both pills at once or taking 2 doses 12 hours apart have the same effectiveness. The pills are effective if taken up to 120 hours (5 days) after you have had unprotected sex.

If you choose to take 2 doses, take each emergency contraceptive pill exactly 12 hours apart. Before you take the first dose, think ahead about where you will be 12 hours later.

Make sure you will be awake and in a convenient place in 12 hours when it is time for the second dose. Eat something with the pills to help prevent nausea. Nausea is usually mild and should stop in a day or so. If you vomit within one hour after taking a dose, call your doctor or healthcare provider.

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 your last dose of ECPs. 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 from having 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.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673).
- Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233.