

## Education

### Emergency Birth Control Pill (Morning-After Pill)

What is the emergency birth control pill?

The emergency birth control pill, also called the morning-after pill, is a birth control pill that can prevent pregnancy if a woman takes it within 72 hours (3 days) of having sex. It may be used when you have had sex without birth control or have been sexually assaulted (raped). It may also be used when a barrier method of birth control has failed (for example, a condom breaks). If you are already pregnant, emergency birth control will NOT work.

The emergency birth control pill contains the female hormone called progestin. It may work in several ways to prevent pregnancy, such as:

- Stop the release of an egg from the ovary.
- Stop fertilization (the uniting of the sperm and the egg).
- Keep a fertilized egg from attaching to the womb.
- Thicken the mucus of the cervix, making it hard for sperm to reach the egg.

If emergency birth control pills fail to keep you from getting pregnant, or you are already pregnant when you take the pills, there is no evidence that the pills will harm you or the baby. The pills will not end a pregnancy that has already started.

When is it used?

Emergency birth control pills may be used after you have had unprotected sex 1 or more times in the last 3 days (72 hours). The pills can be used as a backup method of birth control if, for example:

- Your regular birth control failed (your partner's condom broke or slipped).
- You made a mistake with your regular method (for example, you missed 2 or more birth control pills this month).
- You did not use any birth control method.

If you have unprotected sex again after taking the pills, the pills will not protect you from getting pregnant.

Women 18 years old or older can purchase emergency birth control pills without a prescription. Women 17 and younger need a prescription from their health care provider.

How is it used?

Usually you will take the first dose as soon as possible and not later than 72 hours after unprotected intercourse. You will take another dose 12 hours later. Carefully follow the package instructions or your health care provider's directions for taking the pills.

The pills may cause nausea and vomiting. If you vomit within 1 hour of taking either dose of the medicine, call your health care provider to discuss whether you should repeat the dose.

Most women will have their next menstrual period at the expected time or within a week of the expected time. If your menstrual period is more than a week late, you may be pregnant. You should take a pregnancy test. If you are pregnant, see your health care provider.

What are the benefits of the emergency birth control pill?

The benefits are:

- prevention of unplanned pregnancies
- prevention of abortions for unwanted pregnancies.

Also, the pills are safe as a method of emergency birth control if you are breast-feeding.

Seven of every 8 women who would have gotten pregnant will not become pregnant if they take the pills within 72 hours after sex. The pills work even better than this if they are taken within the first 24 hours (1 day) after sex.

What are the disadvantages?

The pills are meant for infrequent emergency protection. They cannot be used as a regular birth control method. They do not work as well as most other forms of birth control when these other methods are used correctly. If you need to use emergency birth control often, you should ask your health care provider about the best methods of birth control and STD prevention for you.

The pills may cause side effects such as:

- nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- abdominal pain
- tiredness
- dizziness
- changes in your periods
- breast pain
- headaches.

Emergency birth control does not protect you from AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. Latex or polyurethane condoms are the only safe way to protect against AIDS.

Who should not use emergency birth control?

You should not use emergency birth control if:

- You are already pregnant (because they will not work).
- You are allergic to the hormone in the pills.

If you have had blood clots or other health problems because of using other birth control pills, ask your health care provider before taking emergency birth control pills.

When should I call my health care provider?

If you have taken emergency birth control pills, call your health care provider right away if:

- You have severe lower stomach pain about 3 to 5 weeks after taking the pills, which could be caused by a tubal pregnancy. A tubal (ectopic) pregnancy needs immediate medical treatment.
- You have pain, redness, or swelling in your leg.
- Your arms, legs, hands, or feet are numb.
- You have vision problems, such as blurred vision or a partial or total loss of vision.

Also call your health care provider if your menstrual period does not start within 21 days (3 weeks) after you took emergency birth control.

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