

# Emergency Contraception

Sometimes called the 'morning after pill' or 'after sex pill'

**Emergency contraception (EC) is available over the counter at pharmacies, so you don't need to see a doctor to get a prescription. EC may be used to prevent pregnancy when intercourse has occurred either:**

- **without contraception**
- **when contraception may have failed**
- **when forced sexual intercourse or sexual assault has occurred.**

## What is emergency contraception?

EC usually consists of a unique dose of oral hormonal pills, or for some women an IUD (intrauterine device) may be used (see IUD section overleaf).

EC contains a progestogen-type hormone. Earlier types of pills contained both oestrogen and progestogen, and were more likely to cause nausea and sometimes vomiting. Progestogen alone is more effective and has very few side effects.

## Who can take it?

Any woman can take EC, even women who cannot take the Pill because they get migraines or have had a thrombosis (blood clot).

## How do you take it?

EC is most effective at preventing pregnancy when taken within 24 hours of having sex (the sooner it is taken the more effective it is). There is some effectiveness for up to 120 hours (5 days) after intercourse, however effectiveness decreases as time passes and is significantly reduced 72 hours (3 days) after sex.

EC has traditionally been taken as two doses, twelve hours apart, but research shows the effectiveness may be greater if both doses are taken together. This can also be useful if you are concerned about losing the second dose, or forgetting to take it. There may, however, be more side effects such as nausea or tiredness when it is taken in this way.

## How does it work?

EC prevents pregnancy in several ways. If the pills are taken before the woman ovulates (releases her monthly egg) they can delay ovulation. The hormones in the pills can also affect the transport of sperm and egg in the uterus and fallopian tubes, and possibly the lining of the uterus.

## Possible side effects

- **Breast tenderness and mild headaches**

These symptoms usually disappear within 48 hours and require no treatment.

- **Nausea**

Some women experience nausea, but vomiting is unlikely.

- **Tiredness**

Mild 'flu-like' feelings are not uncommon.

## When to expect your period

Your period could be early, late or on time. Most women have a period within three weeks of taking the emergency pills.



## Can it fail?

The risk of becoming pregnant after taking EC is between 1-3%. It is most effective if taken within 24 hours of having sex. It is most likely to fail if any of the following circumstances occur:

- you are already pregnant, ie you have had unprotected sex at other times since your last period
- you vomit within two hours of taking the pills
- you have unprotected sex after taking the pills.

If your period is over one week late, is unusually light or you suspect you may be pregnant, contact FPWA or a doctor. If you do become pregnant despite taking EC there is no medical evidence that the developing baby will be harmed.

## Ectopic pregnancy

An ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy in a fallopian tube) is a rare but possible complication following the use of EC. This is a serious condition that needs urgent medical attention. For this reason, if you get unusual pain in the lower abdomen in the next month you need to be examined immediately by a doctor at your local general practice or at FPWA, King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women or the nearest hospital emergency department.

## Check up

You should visit a doctor or FPWA clinician if you are experiencing any lower abdominal pain or your period is different (eg lighter or heavier than usual) or hasn't started within three weeks. FPWA offers routine pregnancy tests three weeks after taking EC to women who feel any uncertainty as to whether it has been effective.

Having unprotected sex can put you at risk of sexually transmissible infections (STIs). A doctor or FPWA clinician can organise an STI test for you.

## Ongoing contraception

If you have no regular method of contraception, visit a doctor or FPWA clinician to discuss methods that may be suitable for you. If you choose to use the oral contraceptive pill as your method of contraception, it can be started on the day following the emergency pills.

## The IUD as emergency contraception

In some women the insertion of an IUD may be used as emergency contraception. This may be appropriate if you are planning to use an IUD for future contraception, or if it is later than 72 hours but less than 5 days since you had unprotected sex. Please ask your doctor for more information. The IUD may not be suitable for some women.

**Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).**



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