

emergency contraception



EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

Emergency contraception is a safe, effective and responsible method of preventing pregnancy when regular contraception has failed, no contraception was used and/or in the case of sexual assault. If you act quickly, emergency contraception will usually prevent pregnancy.

ALSO KNOWN AS POST-COITAL CONTRACEPTION IT IS AVAILABLE IN TWO FORMS:

- » Emergency contraceptive pill (ECP)
- » Insertion of a copper intrauterine device (IUCD)

REMEMBER: If you have had unprotected sex, it is possible that you have contracted a sexually transmitted disease (STI). Emergency contraception will not prevent you from getting an STI. Most STIs are treatable, but often have no symptoms. So if you are worried speak to your GP or family planning clinic about how to arrange testing and, if necessary, treatment.

WHERE DO YOU GET EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION?

The emergency contraceptive pill is available from your GP or family planning clinic and is also now available directly from pharmacies without a prescription from a doctor. The IUCD can be fitted by your doctor or family planning clinic but is not as widely available so phone ahead for an appointment.

METHOD 1: EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILL (ECP)

The emergency contraceptive pill contains a progestogen hormone which is similar to the natural progesterone women produce in their ovaries. The pill should be taken within three days (72 hours) of having unprotected sex.

The emergency contraceptive pill works by preventing or delaying ovulation and possibly preventing fertilisation. The emergency contraceptive pill stops a pregnancy before it is established. It does not work if you are already pregnant. Medical research and legal judgement are quite clear that emergency contraception (the pill or an IUCD) prevents pregnancy and is not abortion.

HOW DO I TAKE THE EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILL

The emergency contraceptive pill comes in a packet of one. Take it as soon as possible, preferably within 12 hours, and no later than 72 hours (3 days) after you have had unprotected sex. Swallow the tablet whole, with water if necessary. Do not delay taking the tablet. The tablet works better the sooner you take it after having unprotected sex.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILL?

OF THE PREGNANCIES THAT COULD BE EXPECTED TO HAVE OCCURRED IF NO EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION HAD BEEN USED THE EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILL WILL PREVENT:

- » Up to 95% if taken within 24 hours
- » Up to 85% if taken between 25-48 hours
- » Up to 58% if taken between 49-72 hours

The earlier it is taken the more effective it is and most effective if taken within 24 hours.

IT DOES NOT WORK IF YOU:

- » Take the pill more than 72 hours after unprotected sex
- » Vomit within three hours after taking the pill
- » Don't take the pill as instructed
- » Have had unprotected sex since taking the emergency contraceptive pill

The emergency contraceptive pill is not as effective as other forms of contraception and does not protect against sexually transmitted infections.

DO I NEED TO SEE A DOCTOR AFTER I'VE TAKEN ECP?

Not usually, but go see a doctor or nurse if:

- » Your next period is more than five days late
- » Your period is unusually light or heavy
- » You have any sudden or unusual pain in your lower abdomen

These could be signs that the emergency contraceptive pill has failed and that you are pregnant.

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION CONTD.

ALSO CONTACT YOUR DOCTOR IF

- » You think you may be pregnant
- » You want to talk about using regular contraception
- » You are worried that you might have an STI

WHO IS IT SUITABLE FOR?

Almost every woman can use the emergency contraceptive pill. However if you are taking certain prescribed or complementary medicines, or suffer from particular illnesses, you may need special advice. Tell your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about any medicines you are taking or illnesses you may have.

ARE THERE ANY SIDE-EFFECTS?

There are no serious short- or long-term effects from using the emergency contraceptive pill. However, some women may feel sick, dizzy or tired, or may get headaches, breast tenderness, diarrhoea or lower abdominal (tummy) pain. These symptoms should get better within a few days. A very small number of women will vomit. If you are sick, read the section “WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE SICK” (vomit).

WILL THE EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILL PROTECT ME FROM PREGNANCY UNTIL MY NEXT PERIOD?

No. The emergency contraceptive pill will not protect you from pregnancy if you have further unprotected sex. Your doctor, family planning clinic or pharmacist can give you information about different contraceptive choices.

HOW WILL THE ECP AFFECT MY NEXT PERIOD?

Your period might be different. Most women will have a normal period at the expected time, but some may have their period later or earlier than normal. You might also have some irregular bleeding or spotting until your next period. If your period is more than 5 days late or is unusually light or heavy, you should contact your doctor as soon as possible.

PREGNANCY AND EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

The emergency contraceptive pill is very effective and should be taken as soon as possible after unprotected sex. However some women may become pregnant even though the pill was taken correctly.

YOU MAY ALSO BECOME PREGNANT IF YOU:

- » Delay taking the emergency contraceptive pill
- » Vomit within 3 hours of taking the pill
- » Have had unprotected sex since taking the emergency contraceptive pill

The emergency contraceptive pill has not been shown to affect a pregnancy or harm a developing foetus. If you think that you may be pregnant it is important to seek advice as soon as possible.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE SICK

If you are sick (vomit) within three hours of taking the tablet, you should take another dose. You will need to contact your doctor, family planning clinic or pharmacist immediately for a second dose. You can get an anti-sickness pill with the second dose.

CAN I TAKE IT MORE THAN ONCE IN A YEAR/MONTH/LIFETIME?

Yes. You can take the emergency contraceptive pill more than once with no harmful effects, though it may disrupt your periods. If you are regularly using emergency contraception it would indicate that you need to review your contraceptive choices as the emergency contraceptive pill is not as effective as using other methods and is more expensive.

CAN I GET THE ECP IN ADVANCE?

Yes. If you are worried about your contraceptive method failing or cannot get emergency contraception easily, discuss this option with your doctor, family planning clinic or pharmacist.

COMBINING WITH REGULAR CONTRACEPTIVE PILL USE

If you need emergency contraception because you forgot to take some of your regular pills, you should take your regular pill again within 12 hours of the last dose of emergency pills. You will need to use an additional contraceptive method, such as condoms, until your contraceptive pill is effective again. This will vary depending on which type of pill you take. The doctor, nurse or pharmacist can advise you.

METHOD 2: THE COPPER INTRAUTERINE DEVICE

WHAT'S INVOLVED?

A doctor fits a copper intrauterine device (IUCD) in your womb up to five days after you had unprotected sex. If you need to come back to have the IUCD fitted, you may be advised to take the emergency contraceptive pill in the meantime.

HOW DOES THE IUCD WORK?

It may stop an egg being fertilised or implanting in your womb.

HOW EFFECTIVE AS EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION IS THE IUCD?

The IUCD is the most effective method of emergency contraception. It will prevent more than 9 out of 10 (98%) pregnancies expected to occur if no emergency contraception had been used. It can also provide ongoing contraception if you want to use this method.

CAN ANYONE USE AN IUCD FOR EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION?

Most women can use an IUCD for emergency contraception.

AN IUCD MAY BE SUITABLE IF YOU:

- » Want to use the most effective method of emergency contraception
- » Are too late to take the emergency contraceptive pill (over 72 hours after unprotected sex)
- » Do not want to, or cannot, take progestogen
- » Want to use the IUCD as an ongoing method of contraception

For more on the IUCD as a long-acting reversible contraceptive method ask for IFPA FACT SHEET NO. 9.

TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT AT AN IFPA MEDICAL CENTRE OR FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OUR SERVICES PLEASE CALL:

IFPA, 5-7 Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin 1
T: +353 (1) 872 7088

IFPA, The Square, Tallaght, Dublin
T: +353 (1) 459 7685

THE IFPA ALSO OPERATES A NATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICE PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND DETAILS OF STI AND CONTRACEPTIVE SERVICES IN YOUR AREA.

T: +353 (1) 607 4456
E: post@ifpa.ie

DON'T FORGET – THIS LEAFLET CAN ONLY OUTLINE BASIC INFORMATION ON EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION. INFORMATION IS BASED ON EVIDENCE AND MEDICAL OPINION AT THE TIME OF PUBLICATION HOWEVER YOU MAY COME ACROSS CONFLICTING ADVICE ON CERTAIN POINTS. RING OR VISIT YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU ARE WORRIED OR UNSURE ABOUT ANYTHING.

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