



## Emergency Contraception

**E**mergency contraception (EC) is used to prevent pregnancy if a woman has had **sexual intercourse** without using a birth control method, if her current method fails, or if she is raped.

There are two forms of EC available in the United States: 1) the copper **intrauterine device (IUD)** and 2) EC pills. Some EC pills are available over the counter to anyone of any age. Other pills and the IUD are available by prescription.

*This pamphlet explains*

- *when to use EC*
- *the different types of EC*
- *how to get EC*
- *side effects and safety*
- *starting or going back to a birth control method after using EC pills*
- *follow-up care*

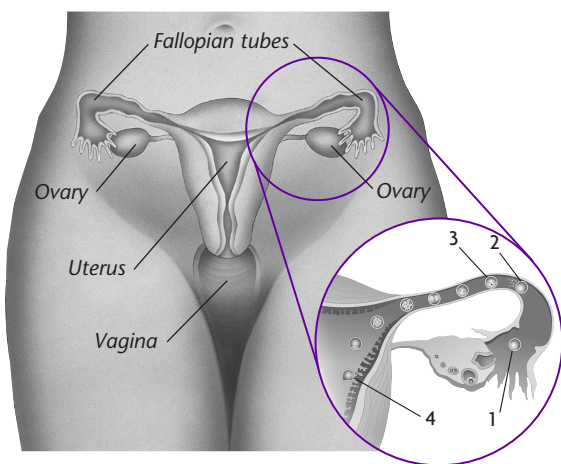
### When to Use Emergency Contraception

EC reduces the chance of pregnancy after unprotected sexual intercourse. Common situations in which EC could be used include forgetting to take several birth control pills in a row, having a condom break or slip off, or not using a birth control method during sex. It also can be used after a woman has been raped.

### How Emergency Contraception Works

Using EC does not cause an abortion. An abortion ends an existing pregnancy. EC prevents pregnancy from occurring. EC must be used soon after unprotected sexual intercourse to be effective. It does not work if pregnancy has already occurred.

## How Pregnancy Occurs



Each month during ovulation an egg is released (1) and moves into one of the fallopian tubes. If a woman has sex around this time, and an egg and sperm meet in the fallopian tube (2), the two may join. If they join (3), the fertilized egg then moves through the fallopian tube into the uterus and attaches there to grow during pregnancy (4).

## Types of EC

There are two types of EC: 1) the copper IUD and 2) EC pills (see table). The copper IUD is the most effective form of emergency contraception and can be kept in place for birth control for up to 10 years. Ulipristal is the second most effective form. Other oral forms of EC are less effective than the copper IUD and ulipristal.

### Copper Intrauterine Device

Having a copper IUD inserted is the most effective EC method in preventing pregnancy. It works mainly by making **sperm** less able to fertilize the **egg**. When used for EC, the IUD should be inserted within 5 days of having unprotected sex. You then can rely on the IUD for long-term birth control (for up to 10 years). An **obstetrician-gynecologist (ob-gyn)** or other health care professional must insert the IUD. You can have the IUD removed at any time if you wish to become pregnant.

### Pills

There are three types of EC pills: 1) progestin-only pills, 2) ulipristal, and 3) combined hormonal birth control pills. Even if you have a health condition that prevents you from using birth control pills long-term, you may still be able to use EC pills.

EC pills can be used more than once during a single **menstrual cycle**, but you should not rely on EC as a long-term birth control method. EC is not as effective in preventing pregnancy as using a birth control method consistently and correctly. There also may be more side effects from frequent use of EC than from use of a standard birth control method. If you are not using birth control, talk to your ob-gyn or other health

care professional about which method would work best for you.

Some research suggests that being overweight or obese may decrease the effectiveness of EC pills. If you are overweight or obese, you may want to consider having a copper IUD inserted. Copper IUDs are effective in women of any weight.

**Progestin-Only Pills.** Progestin-only EC is a single pill that should be taken as soon as possible after having unprotected sex. Progestin is a **hormone** in birth control pills and other forms of hormonal birth control. It stops or delays **ovulation** to prevent pregnancy. It is most effective when taken within 3 days of unprotected sex. It is moderately effective when taken within 5 days.

**Ulipristal.** Ulipristal is a drug that affects how **progesterone** works in the body. It is thought to delay or prevent ovulation. It can be taken up to 5 days after unprotected sex with no decrease in effectiveness. When taken as directed, ulipristal is more effective in preventing pregnancy than progestin-only or combined EC pills. It is available by prescription only.

**Combined Pills.** Birth control pills that contain both **estrogen** and progestin are called combined pills. Taken in higher-than-usual amounts, they can be used for EC. They are taken in two doses. The number of pills needed for EC differs for each brand of pill. An ob-gyn, other health care professional, or pharmacist can tell you how many pills you should take for the type that you have. You also can find this information at the website [www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com).

Combined EC pills need to be taken as soon as possible up to 5 days after unprotected sex. They work by stopping or delaying ovulation.

Nausea and vomiting are more likely to occur with combined EC pills than with other types of EC pills. If you vomit within 3 hours of taking either dose, take another dose as soon as possible. You may want to check with your pharmacy or call your ob-gyn or other health care professional about taking antinausea medication.

Combined EC pills are not as effective in preventing pregnancy as the progestin-only EC pill. For this reason and because of its lower risk of nausea and vomiting, the progestin-only EC pill is preferred over combined EC pills.

## How to Get Emergency Contraception

The progestin-only pill is available over the counter in pharmacies and other stores to anyone of any age. The progestin-only pill usually can be found in the family planning section. Not all stores carry the over-the-counter EC pill, so it is best to call ahead to see if it is available.

You also can get EC pills ahead of time so that you always have them if needed. You can purchase them in advance at a pharmacy or online. Many pharmacies offer online ordering and shipping services.

**Table 1. Emergency Contraception**

<i>Type</i>	<i>Availability</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>How to Use</i>
Copper IUD	Available by prescription only	Office of an ob-gyn or other health care professional; family planning clinics	Have the copper IUD inserted within 5 days of unprotected sex.
Ulipristal	Available by prescription only	Behind the pharmacy counter	Take one pill as soon as possible within 5 days of unprotected sex. If vomiting occurs within 3 hours of taking the pill, take another dose as soon as possible.
<i>Progestin</i> -only pill (single pill)	Available without a prescription to anyone of any age	On store shelves with other over-the-counter medications	Take one pill as soon as possible within 5 days of unprotected sex. If vomiting occurs within 3 hours of taking the pill, take another dose as soon as possible.
Combined birth control pills	Available by prescription only	Behind the pharmacy counter	Exact dosages vary with different types of pills. Take the first dose as soon as possible within 5 days of unprotected sex. Take the second dose 2 hours after the first. If vomiting occurs within 3 hours of taking either dose, take another dose as soon as possible.

Ulipristal, combined birth control pills, and the copper IUD are available only by prescription. To get a prescription or to have the copper IUD inserted, call your ob-gyn or other health care professional or go to a family planning clinic. Another option is to go to [www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com). You also can ask your ob-gyn or other health care professional to give you a prescription for these EC pills at any routine health care visit. That way, you are always prepared if you need to use these forms of EC.

### Side Effects and Safety

EC pills have not been shown to cause any serious complications. Your next period may not occur at the expected time. You may have irregular bleeding or spotting in the week or month after taking EC pills that goes away on its own. Other short-term side effects of EC pills can include the following:

- Headache
- Nausea and vomiting (especially if you are taking combined EC pills)

- Breast tenderness
- Abdominal pain
- Dizziness
- Fatigue

With the copper IUD, menstrual pain and bleeding may increase in the first few months of use. Pain can be relieved with over-the-counter pain relievers. Heavy bleeding sometimes can be treated with a medication. Both side effects usually decrease within 1 year of using the copper IUD.

### Starting or Going Back to a Birth Control Method After Using EC Pills

It is possible to become pregnant later in the same menstrual cycle if you have used EC pills. To prevent pregnancy, you will need to use birth control:

- If you used the progestin-only pill or combined EC pills, you can resume or start any birth control method right away. For the next 7 days, you also must use

a barrier method (condoms, diaphragm, and spermicides) along with your regular birth control method or not have sexual intercourse.

- If you used ulipristal and want to resume or start using a hormonal birth control method (pill, patch, ring, implant, shot, or hormonal IUD), you need to wait to do so until 5 days after taking ulipristal. You also must use a barrier method (or not have sexual intercourse) until your next menstrual period. Using a hormonal birth control method and taking ulipristal at the same time can reduce the effectiveness of both medications.

## Follow-up Care

No tests or procedures are needed after taking EC. However, see your ob-gyn or other health care professional for a pregnancy test if you have not had a period within a week of when you expect it. None of the EC pills have been shown to harm a pregnancy or the health of the fetus if you already are pregnant. See your ob-gyn or other health care professional right away if you have lower abdominal pain or if you have bleeding or spotting that lasts longer than a week. These can be signs of a *miscarriage* or *ectopic pregnancy*.

Keep in mind that EC does not prevent *sexually transmitted infections (STIs)*. If you are at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection and have had unprotected sex, see your ob-gyn or other health care professional.

## Finally...

If you have sex without birth control, use EC. It can reduce the chance of pregnancy after unprotected sex. If you are sexually active and do not want to become pregnant, use birth control correctly every time you have sex. An ob-gyn or other health care professional can help you choose a method that works best for you.

## Glossary

**Ectopic Pregnancy:** A pregnancy in a place other than the uterus, usually in one of the fallopian tubes.

**Egg:** The female reproductive cell made in and released from the ovaries. Also called the ovum.

**Emergency Contraception (EC):** Methods that are used to prevent pregnancy after a woman has had sex without birth control, after the method has failed, or after a rape.

**Estrogen:** A female hormone produced in the ovaries.

**Hormone:** A substance made in the body that controls the function of cells or organs.

**Intrauterine Device (IUD):** A small device that is inserted and left inside the uterus to prevent pregnancy.

**Menstrual Cycle:** The monthly process of changes that occur to prepare a woman's body for possible pregnancy. A menstrual cycle is defined as the first day of menstrual bleeding of one cycle to the first day of menstrual bleeding of the next cycle.

**Miscarriage:** Loss of a pregnancy that is in the uterus.

**Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn):** A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

**Ovulation:** The time when an ovary releases an egg.

**Progesterone:** A female hormone that is made in the ovaries and prepares the lining of the uterus for pregnancy.

**Progestin:** A synthetic form of progesterone that is similar to the hormone made naturally by the body.

**Sexual Intercourse:** The act of the penis of the male entering the vagina of the female. Also called "having sex" or "making love."

**Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):** Infections that are spread by sexual contact. Infections include chlamydia, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus (HPV), herpes, syphilis, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS]).

**Sperm:** A cell made in the male testicles that can fertilize a female egg.

This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) to ensure accuracy.

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