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# What Every Physician Needs to Know About Emergency Contraception

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## What Is Emergency Contraception?

- Emergency contraception (EC) is a safe and effective back-up birth control method.<sup>i</sup>
- It prevents pregnancy after unprotected intercourse or contraceptive failure.
- Recent research shows that EC may be effective if taken within the first five days after unprotected sex; however, experts recommend taking the pills as soon as possible.<sup>ii iii</sup>
- EC is not an abortifacient and should not be confused with RU-486, mifepristone, or medication abortion.<sup>iv</sup>

## What Kinds of Emergency Contraceptive Pills Are Available in the United States?

- Plan B<sup>®</sup> is the only designated product on the market. It contains only progestin and was approved by the FDA in July 1999.<sup>v</sup>
- Other brands of daily birth control pills, when taken in high doses, can be used as EC. See [www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com) for more information.

## How Does EC Work?

- EC prevents pregnancy the same way the regular birth control pill does: by delaying or inhibiting ovulation, inhibiting fertilization, or preventing implantation of a fertilized egg in the uterus.

- All of these events occur before pregnancy, which medical science defines as the implantation of a fertilized egg in the lining of the uterus.<sup>vi</sup>
- EC does not interrupt existing pregnancy. It will not work if a woman is already pregnant.<sup>vii</sup>

### **How Effective Is EC?**

- Taken within the first 72 hours, progestin-only EC pills reduce the risk of pregnancy after unprotected intercourse by 89%.<sup>viii</sup>
- EC is more effective the sooner it is taken.<sup>ix</sup>
- Recent research shows that taking progestin-only EC within the first 24 hours after unprotected intercourse can reduce pregnancy by 95%.<sup>x</sup>

### **Does EC Have Any Side Effects?**

- Some women using EC may experience temporary side effects, including nausea, vomiting, and breast tenderness.
- EC has no known serious side effects.<sup>xi</sup>
- There are no known risks to a developing fetus.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Who Can Use EC?**

- All women can take EC—even those who cannot take birth control pills.
- The only contraindications to EC are allergy to the medication, undiagnosed abnormal genital bleeding, and pregnancy.

### **Where Can Women Get EC?**

- EC pills will be available over the counter in the United States to women over the age of 18 starting in November 2006.
- Health professionals are exploring ways to provide EC to women under 18 who cannot get to their provider within the 72-to-120-hour window.

- In Alaska, California, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Vermont, and Washington, there are collaborative agreements between individual physicians and pharmacists to provide EC.

## Additional Resources

- 1-888-NOT-2-LATE, or in Spanish, 1-888-en-tres-dias (24-hour, toll free)
- The emergency contraception website at [www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com)

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