

# What You Should Know About Emergency Contraception

**W**hat happens when a woman has unintended sex or her regular method of birth control fails or is forgotten? For a woman who wants to prevent pregnancy, emergency contraception (EC) is available.

## What is emergency contraception?

EC, sometimes also called “the morning-after pill,” can be taken after intercourse to prevent pregnancy. There are several options:

- Plan B One-Step™ (levonorgestrel 1.5 mg) is most effective when taken within 72 hours after intercourse. The dose is 1 tablet.
- A generic version of that drug, Next Choice® (levonorgestrel .75 mg), is most effective when taken within 72 hours after intercourse. The dose is 2 tablets, taken 12 hours apart.
- A prescription drug called ella® (ulipristal acetate) can be used up to 120 hours (5 days) after sex.

## How does emergency contraception work?

EC keeps a woman’s ovaries from releasing eggs (ovulation). Pregnancy cannot happen if no egg joins with the man’s sperm. The sperm may live up to 5 days in the woman’s fallopian tubes. EC is most effective the sooner after intercourse the pill is taken. *EC must be taken after each instance of unprotected sex, even within the same month.*

## How do I obtain emergency contraception?

Plan B One-Step™ and Next Choice® are available without a prescription and can be purchased at a pharmacy by men or women 17 or older (women younger than 17 need a prescription). These tablets are kept behind the counter, so you must ask a pharmacy worker to get it. EC tablets may also be available at family planning clinics. Ella® is sold only with a prescription from a health care professional.

Although EC can be purchased at any time, some women obtain it in advance, just in case it is needed. Check with your pharmacist about shelf life.

## Is emergency contraception safe?

EC is safe. It is made of the same hormone as in birth control pills. No serious complications have been reported with its use. Side effects may include short-



term nausea, headaches, pelvic pain, cramping, or irregular bleeding.

If a woman is already pregnant, the EC pill has no effect and will not disturb the pregnancy. The EC pill is not an abortion pill. EC will not protect against sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV.

## Am I guaranteed not to get pregnant if I take emergency contraception?

When taken within 72 hours after unprotected intercourse, Plan B One-Step™ and Next Choice® reduce the risk of pregnancy by 89%. Ella® is even more effective, up to 5 days after intercourse.

*Emergency contraceptives should not be used as routine birth control. Other forms of birth control are preferable for long-term pregnancy prevention.* If you are sexually active but do not wish to become pregnant, you have the option to develop a long-range plan for birth control with your health care provider. He or she can counsel you about the many methods of contraception, such as birth control pills, intrauterine devices, and condoms, and which is the best choice for you.

**For more information on all methods of birth control, including EC, see [www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/unintendedpregnancy/contraception.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/unintendedpregnancy/contraception.htm).**