



Emergency Contraception

What is emergency contraception?

Emergency contraception is a form of birth control. You can use this method if you have had unprotected sex and are worried that you might get pregnant. For example, if your regular birth control fails (the condom breaks during sex), if you forget to take your birth control pills or if you have sex without using any birth control.

There are 2 types of emergency contraception. With the first, you take special doses of birth control pills. With the other, an intrauterine device (also called an IUD) is placed in your uterus (or womb).

How do I use emergency contraception?

The first kind of emergency contraception, sometimes called the "morning-after pill," is taken for 1 day only. You can start taking this kind of emergency contraception right away after having unprotected sex. The sooner you take it, the better it works, but you can take the first dose within 120 hours (5 days) after having unprotected sex.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration also has said that some brands of regular birth control pills are safe for emergency use. The number of pills you take in each dose depends on which brand of pills you are using. To learn more about which pills are safe for emergency use, talk with your health care provider.

An IUD that is placed in your uterus within 7 days after unprotected sex also can be used as emergency contraception. An IUD is a small device that can be left in your body for 5 to 10 years. It will prevent pregnancy during that time. This must be done at a GYN office.

How does emergency contraception work?

Pills used for emergency contraception can prevent your ovaries from releasing an egg, can prevent an egg from being fertilized by sperm or can prevent a fertilized egg from attaching itself to the wall of the uterus. Emergency contraceptive pills are not the same as the medicine known as the "abortion pill." This medicine is taken in the early weeks of pregnancy to end the pregnancy. Pills used as emergency contraception can't end a pregnancy once a fertilized egg has attached itself to the wall of the uterus.

IUD- Unlike the morning-after pill, an IUD doesn't stop your ovaries from releasing an egg. The IUD can prevent an egg from being fertilized and it can stop a fertilized egg from attaching itself to the wall of the uterus.

No studies have shown that taking hormones while you are pregnant can hurt your baby. However, if you know you are pregnant, you should not take emergency contraception pills.

How effective is emergency contraception?

Emergency contraceptive pills can be very effective if they are used in time. If used within 72 hours of unprotected sex, it can reduce the risk of pregnancy by 75% to 89%. It is important to remember that these pills will work best when taken as soon as possible after unprotected sex.

Emergency IUD insertion is also very effective. It can reduce the risk of pregnancy by 99.9% if inserted within 7 days after unprotected sex.

It is important to remember that using this type of contraception regularly is less effective than using ongoing methods of contraception (like normal birth control pills or diaphragms). Emergency contraception should not be your main type of contraception.

Are there any side effects?

Some women feel sick to their stomach after they take emergency contraceptive pills. This feeling should go away in about two days. Your provider can give you medicine that may help you feel better.

A possible side effect of an IUD is bleeding between periods. Talk to your doctor to find out more about how IUDs work. You also can find more about IUDs on familydoctor.org.

Who can use emergency contraception?

If you can take regular birth control pills, you should be able to take emergency contraceptive pills. If you are pregnant, have breast cancer, or have had blood clots, you should not use emergency contraceptive pills. Talk with your medical provider about whether emergency contraception is right for you.

You should not use an IUD if you have a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or if you have been raped. Talk to your doctor about other options.

When do I need to start taking my regular birth control again?

After you take emergency contraceptive pills, your period may come earlier or later than usual. Call your provider if you do not get your period within 21 days after taking the pills.

If your regular form of birth control is condoms, spermicides or a diaphragm, you may go back to using them right away after taking emergency contraceptive pills.

If your regular form of birth control is the pill, shot, contraceptive patch or vaginal ring, talk to your provider about when to start using it again.

Other considerations

If you need to take emergency contraception for unprotected sex, you also may be at risk for STD's. Talk to your medical provider to see if testing / treatment may be necessary.