

## What is emergency contraception?

Emergency contraceptive pills, the most commonly used form of emergency contraception, are pills made up of the same hormones found in regular birth control pills and are taken in a short, elevated dose. Emergency contraceptive pills are at least 75% effective at preventing pregnancy when taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex. Emergency contraceptive pills **prevent** pregnancy. They **do not** cause an abortion. There are now two prepackaged emergency contraceptive pill products (called Plan B™ and Preven™) as well as 11 brands of birth control pills that can be used for emergency contraception. Another emergency contraceptive method, the Copper-T IUD, can be inserted within five days of unprotected sex to prevent pregnancy.



## Where can women get emergency contraceptive pills?

Women can get emergency contraception from doctors or clinics and, in Washington State, women can also go directly to a pharmacist participating in a collaborative drug therapy agreement. The collaborative agreement enables the pharmacist to dispense emergency contraceptive pills directly to patients who request them (either in advance or as needed). The Emergency Contraception Hotline (1-888-NOT-2-LATE) is another good resource. It will provide five clinics and five pharmacies within the caller's telephone prefix area that provide emergency contraceptive pills. A complete listing of providers also is available on the Emergency Contraception Website ([www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com)).

## How safe are emergency contraceptive pills?

There are no known serious side effects of emergency contraceptive pills. Some women using emergency contraceptive pills may experience temporary side effects, which include nausea, and sometimes vomiting, particularly with estrogen/progestin formulation. The FDA has published an article in the *Federal Register* calling emergency contraceptive pills safe and effective as "after the fact" birth control.

## How do emergency contraceptive pills work?

Pregnancy is a process. It takes approximately six days for the egg to be fertilized and implant in the uterine wall (the clinical definition of pregnancy). Emergency contraceptive pills are thought to work through several possible mechanisms of action during this process.<sup>1</sup> Clinical studies have shown that ECPs can inhibit or delay ovulation.<sup>2,3,4</sup> It has also been suggested that ECPs may prevent implantation by altering the endometrium (the uterine lining where a fertilized egg implants). However the evidence for endometrial effects of ECP treatment is mixed and it is not clear that the endometrial changes observed would inhibit implantation.<sup>2,3,5,6,7</sup> It is also biologically possible that emergency contraceptive pills prevent fertilization (through thickening of the cervical mucus resulting in trapping of sperm or alterations in the tubal transport of sperm or egg), but no clinical data exist regarding this possible mechanism. Statistical evidence suggests that emergency contraceptive pills must work through more than one of these mechanisms to be as effective as they are.<sup>1</sup>

## How much do emergency contraceptive pills cost?

In Washington State, medical coupons cover both Plan B™ and Preven™, as well as regular birth control pills prescribed in special doses for use as emergency contraception. Medicaid also covers pharmacist counseling time for women who receive emergency contraceptive pills directly from their pharmacist. For women using private insurance, it is common to pay a co-pay of \$5 to \$10. If the woman does not have insurance coverage, the prices are in the range of \$18 to \$23 for Plan B™ and \$20 to \$23 for Preven™.

## Questions and Answers Reference List

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