

FACT SHEET 5. Emergency Contraceptive Pills (ECPs)

Emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) refer to the special regimen of oral contraceptives used to prevent pregnancy *after* unprotected intercourse. Two common regimens of ECPs are:

- Progestin-only regimen
- Combined estrogen-progestin (Yuzpe) regimen

ECPs prevent between 75 percent and 95 percent of expected pregnancies with the progestin-only regimen being more effective than the Yuzpe regimen. ECPs should be started as soon as possible but generally not later than 120 hours after unprotected intercourse. The sooner ECPs are taken, the more effective they are (e.g., the progestin-only regimen taken within 24 hours after unprotected intercourse prevents 95 percent of expected pregnancies).

Mechanism of action of ECPs

- Prevent or delay ovulation (main mechanism)
- May also have effects after ovulation, possibly preventing fertilization

Once implantation has occurred, ECPs are no longer effective. They do not interrupt an established pregnancy and, if accidentally taken, do not pose any danger to the mother or fetus. Thus, ECPs are not abortifacients.

When to use ECPs

Emergency contraception may be considered in a number of situations when unprotected intercourse occurs. These situations include occasions when:

- No regular contraceptive method was used.
- A method was used, but failed, e.g., the condom broke or slipped during intercourse.
- A method was used incorrectly, e.g., forgetting to take contraceptive pills on time or miscalculating the safe time during the menstrual cycle when using fertility awareness-based methods.
- A woman was coerced into having sex or was raped.

How to take the progestin-only regimen

- Take 2 pills containing 0.75 mg of levonorgestrel within 120 hours after unprotected intercourse.

OR

- Take one pill containing 0.75 mg of levonorgestrel within 120 hours after unprotected intercourse.
- Take another pill containing 0.75 mg of levonorgestrel 12 hours after the first pill.

Where pre-packaged ECPs containing 0.75 mg of levonorgestrel are not available, the required amount of hormone for each dose could be obtained, for example, by taking 20 progestin-only pills (POPs) containing 0.0375 mg of levonorgestrel each (40 total pills).

How to take the combination estrogen-progestin regimen (Yuzpe)

Regular combined oral contraceptive pills (COCs) can be used for this purpose. The number of COC pills taken for each dose will vary depending on the amount of hormones in each pill; however, each dose should contain at least 0.1 mg of ethinyl estradiol and 0.5 mg of levonorgestrel.

When “low-dose” COCs are used (containing 0.03 mg of ethinyl estradiol each):

- Take 4 pills within 120 hours after unprotected intercourse.
- Take another 4 pills 12 hours after the first dose.

When “high-dose” COCs are used (containing 0.05 mg of ethinyl estradiol each):

- Take 2 pills within 120 hours after unprotected intercourse.
- Take another 2 pills 12 hours after the first dose.

Characteristics of ECPs

- Safe, effective, and easy to use
- Can be used at any time during the menstrual cycle
- Can be provided without a prescription
- Do not prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV
- Have short-term side effects

Possible side effects of ECPs (*generally not signs of a health problem*)

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- First menstruation after use of ECPs is likely to come a few days earlier or later than usual

Nausea and vomiting both are more common for the Yuzpe regimen than for the progestin-only regimen.

Who can use ECPs

- Any woman who does not want to become pregnant, including women with HIV and AIDS and those who take antiretroviral drugs (ARVs)

Even if the blood levels of hormones are reduced by ARVs, ECPs still should provide some level of protection from unwanted pregnancy.

There are no known contraindications for ECPs.

Provide follow-up and counseling for

- Any symptom or concern of the client
- Common side effects
- Ongoing contraception if client wants to avoid pregnancy
- Prevention of STIs and HIV

Dispelling myths regarding emergency contraceptive pills

- ECPs *do not* cause abortion and *will not* harm an established pregnancy.