

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION: Frequently Asked Questions from Patients

Facts About Emergency Contraception

What is emergency contraception or EC?

An intrauterine device or pills used to prevent pregnancy after you had unprotected sex with options such as¹:

- An IUD is a small T-shaped device that a physician or other qualified clinician inserts into the uterus. It can be left in place for continued birth control. A pregnancy test will be done before an IUD is placed to make sure you aren't pregnant. The IUD can be removed at any time.
- Pills that contain levonorgestrel or ulipristal are highly effective.²
- The Yuzpe method uses multiple doses of regular birth control pills to prevent ovulation.

When would I use EC?

EC is used if you had sex without using birth control. EC can also be used if you didn't use birth control correctly (i.e., missed taking a pill) or the birth control failed (i.e., condom broke).¹

How does EC work?

All types of EC make it hard for an egg and sperm to join (i.e., fertilize). Pills delay the release of an egg for several days. Sperm can only live for about five days, so if no egg is

present during that time, fertilization cannot take place. If an egg has already been released when an EC pill is taken, it won't be effective. IUDs make it hard for sperm to travel into the fallopian tubes to meet an egg and fertilize it. Copper IUDs harm sperm, so they can't travel. Hormonal IUDs change the uterine lining, making it hard for sperm to leave the uterus and enter the fallopian tubes.^{2,3}

Are EC pills the same as an abortion pill?

No. EC pills work by delaying ovulation. Ovulation is only delayed for a few days, so EC only protects you for the one time you didn't use protection.³

Do IUDs cause an abortion?

No. IUDs make it hard for sperm to leave the uterus and get to an egg to fertilize it.

If I am already pregnant, will using EC pills cause an abortion or hurt my baby?

No. The hormones that delay ovulation are similar to normal pregnancy hormones and won't hurt a fertilized egg or cause a fertilized egg that has already been implanted in the uterus to detach.

Table 1. Available Methods of Emergency Contraception

Type (Brand Name)	Timing	Pregnancy rate after use	Availability
Copper IUD (Paragard®)	Within 120 hours of unprotected intercourse (i.e., five days)	0.1%	Placed by a physician or another qualified clinician
Levonorgestrel-releasing IUD, 52 mg (Mirena®, Liletta®)	Within 120 hours of unprotected intercourse (i.e., five days)	0.3%	Placed by a physician or another qualified clinician
Pills with ulipristal (Ella®)	Within 120 hours of unprotected intercourse (i.e., five days)	1.3% (it may be less effective if you weigh more than 195 pounds) ⁵	Prescription needed
Pills with levonorgestrel (e.g., Plan B One-Step®; Next Choice One Dose; My Way, My Choice)	Within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse (i.e., three days)	2.2% (it may be less effective if you weigh more than 165 pounds) ⁵	Over the counter or online; no identification needed or age restrictions, but some pharmacies may keep it behind the counter; no prescription is required
Yuzpe method (combination pills)	Within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse (i.e., three days)	Variable 2.5% to 2.9%	Regimen includes higher doses of prescription birth control pills; a physician helps you take the proper combination

Table developed from information from Paradise SL, Landis CA, Klein DA. Evidence-based contraception: common questions and answers. *Am Fam Physician*. 2022;106(3):251-259.

How soon do I need to use an EC to make sure I don't get pregnant?

All methods are more effective the sooner they are used. Consider having EC on hand in case your method of birth control fails. Most ECs work if you use them within 72 hours. IUDs and ulipristal pills work within 120 hours of unprotected intercourse.^{1,2}

Does insurance or Medicaid pay for ECs?

Yes. Since the passage of the Affordable Care Act, birth control is covered by insurance and Medicaid.⁴

If I don't have insurance or Medicaid, how expensive is EC?

EC pills cost anywhere from \$11-\$45.⁵ Some EC pills can be ordered online. An IUD costs between \$0-\$1,300. Programs offering free or low-cost medications and IUDs are available.

Can I use ECs more than once?

You can leave an IUD in place to provide birth control for many years.² You can use EC pills more than once each month, but they are not as effective as other birth control options and are more expensive. Consider a stable form of birth control if you are a repeat EC user.

If I take testosterone, do I need to worry about getting pregnant?

Yes. Testosterone supplementation alone is not enough to guarantee that your body stops ovulating, even if you are no longer having periods.

After I take an EC pill or use the Yuzpe method, will I still get my period on time?

Your period may be delayed by a few days.⁶ Take a pregnancy test if you are more than a week late. EC pills do not offer protection if an egg has already been released when you have sex.

What side effects should I be aware of?

With EC pills, there is a small chance of feeling nauseous for a brief period.² Nausea is more common with the Yuzpe method. You should not use the Yuzpe method if you get migraines with aura (also called classic migraines). Cramping is common when an IUD is placed. Your physician will go over any other IUD side effects.

Should I still take my hormonal birth control pills if I took EC pills?

Start taking your birth control pills right after using pills with levonorgestrel or the Yuzpe method, and use another method of birth control for seven days.⁷ If you used a pill with ulipristal (Ella[®]), wait five days before resuming your birth control, and use another method of birth control until your next period.

References

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7. Miles K. Emergency contraception. Accessed August 24, 2023. https://www.babycenter.com/baby/postpartum-health/emergency-contraception_3684

Table 2. Emergency Contraception Questions about Methods ● Yes ● No

	Copper IUD (Paragard [®])	Hormonal IUD with Levonorgestrel (Mirena [®] , Liletta [®])	Pills: Levonorgestrel (Plan B One-Step [®] , Next Choice One Dose, My Way, My Choice)	Pill: Ulipristal (Ella [®])	Combination Pills (Yuzpe Method)
Can I use it before I have sex to prevent pregnancy?	●	●	●	●	●
Will it prevent pregnancy if I have unprotected sex again?	●	●	●	●	●
Will it cause an abortion?	●	●	●	●	●
Can I get it over the counter at the drugstore or order it online?	●	●	●	●	●
Will it protect me from sexually transmitted infections?	●	●	●	●	●

Table developed from information from Paradise SL, Landis CA, Klein DA. Evidence-based contraception: common questions and answers. *Am Fam Physician*. 2022;106(3):251-259 and American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Practice Bulletin No. 152: Emergency contraception. *Obstet Gynecol*. 2015;126(3):e1-e11.