

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

What is emergency contraception? It is sometimes called the “morning after pill”. There are 4 different types – progesterone only method, (“Postinor-2” and this is the only one where no prescription is necessary), oestrogen and progesterone method (less effective and more side effects, eg. nausea and vomiting), the new ulipristal- a selective progesterone receptor modulator (“EllaOne”) and copper IUD insertion. The most common and most easily accessible method is the progesterone-only method. Emergency contraception helps prevent pregnancy from unprotected intercourse. Unprotected intercourse occurs when you have forgotten to take the oral contraceptive pill, you have had inadequate cover from the pill (eg. taking antibiotics, anticonvulsant medication, Vitamin C, St Johns Wort, vomiting, diarrhoea), a condom slipped off or broke, a diaphragm dislodged, you forgot to use any contraception, failed withdrawal method, or you are suspicious of a problem with your method of contraception.

How does it work? It may delay or stop ovulation (if that has not already occurred). It may prevent a fertilised egg implanting into the uterine wall. It may interrupt the production of hormones needed for the pregnancy to continue.

How effective is emergency contraception? The progesterone-only method will prevent about 85% of pregnancies that would otherwise have occurred. Ulipristal may be 3 times more effective than progesterone-only method if taken within the first 24 hours after unprotected intercourse.

When and how is it taken? Since January 2004, the progesterone only method has been available without prescription from any chemist. It comes as 2 tablets and is called “Postinor-2”. The two tablets are taken exactly 12 hours apart and should be taken within 24 hours of unprotected intercourse for best results. If taken after 24 hours, the success is considerably reduced. However, it may be taken within 5 days. Recent studies suggest that the two tablets may be taken at the same time and this may be particularly useful if the second dose is due at an inconvenient time. Ulipristal (as a single 30mg tablet) may be taken up to 5 days too and is available since April 2016. Breastfeeding women may not breastfeed for a week and women taking steroids or who have severe asthma should not take ulipristal. Any contraception containing progesterone (pill, Implanon, Depo-Provera, NuvaRing) should not be taken or administered for 5 days after taking ulipristal but women should be aware of pregnancy risks in these situations.

How much does it cost? Postinor-2 costs about \$30. The pharmacist may ask you a few questions to make sure it is safe for you to take. The same dose of hormones may be found in the “minipill” (Microval, Microlut) but you would have to take 25 pills as the first dose and then another 25

pills 12 hours later. This may be a cheaper option for some women but a prescription is necessary from your doctor. The tablets should be swallowed whole with or without a small amount of water. Ulipristal comes as a single tablet and costs about \$50. A prescription from a doctor is necessary.

What are the side effects? – Some women may feel sick for a short time. A few women may actually vomit (6 in 100). If you do vomit within 2 hours of taking it, you may need to take the medication again. You should see your doctor as soon as possible.

You may experience tender breasts, headaches, abdominal pain, cramps, diarrhoea, feel dizzy or feel tired after taking the medication, but should only last a few days. The medication may not work and a pregnancy may occur. Spotting or bleeding may occur within the first week of taking the medication and the period may be delayed. If your period is delayed more than one week, you should see your doctor for a pregnancy test. If a pregnancy does occur, there may be a higher risk of ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy outside the womb). This is a potentially dangerous condition and you should see your doctor as soon as possible. If a normal pregnancy occurs, studies have shown that there are no harmful effects of progesterone on a developing baby.

What should I do after taking it? It will not give you protection against pregnancy if you have unprotected sex again after taking it. You should use a barrier method (eg. condoms) until you are protected fully by another regular method of contraception (eg. pill, injection, implant, vaginal ring, IUD, etc).

Can I keep taking my oral contraceptive pill? If you have taken emergency contraception (progesterone-only method) because you missed a pill and didn’t follow the 7 day rule, discard any missed pills and continue to take the pill as usual, but you should use a barrier method for the next 7 days and skip the 7 “sugar” or placebo tablets for that month. You are then expected to not get a period for that month. If you have taken ulipristal, you should stop the oral contraceptive pill for 5 days before restarting it.

How often can I take emergency contraception? There is no limit to the number of times you can take it, but it should only be used in an emergency. It is only a back up to your regular method of contraception and is, at best, only 85% effective (progesterone- only method), whereas ulipristal may be more effective.

Emergency contraception (Postinor-2 or EllaOne) will not protect against HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Only condoms or abstinence can give some protection.

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