

Emergency Contraceptive (EC) Medication

What is emergency contraceptive (EC) medication?

Emergency contraceptive (EC) medication is often called “the morning-after pill.” It can help prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex or after contraception failure (for example, a condom breaking). **The sooner you take EC medication after unprotected sex or contraception failure, the better it works.** You should take it within 3 days (72 hours). However, it may still work if you take it within 5 days (120 hours).

How does EC medication work?

EC medication is a concentrated dose of female hormones. It can work in three ways:

- It may keep an egg from leaving the ovary.
- It may keep the sperm from meeting the egg.
- It may keep a fertilized egg from attaching to the uterus.

Plan B® (levonorgestrel) is the most common type of emergency contraception. It comes in two forms:

- Medication in two doses, taken 12 hours apart
- Medication taken as a single dose of 2 pills (Plan B® One-Step)

Where can I get EC medication?

- **If you are a victim of sexual assault, any hospital** will provide EC medication at your request.
- **You can also get Plan B** from a **pharmacy** without a prescription. The FDA has approved this medication to be sold without age restrictions. (Call the pharmacy ahead to make sure it dispenses Plan B.)



Common questions about EC medication

- **Is EC medication guaranteed to work?** EC medication is not perfect. But the sooner it is taken, the better it works. Plan B medication is up to 95% effective if taken within 24 hours of unprotected sex. It is up to 89% effective if taken within 72 hours.
- **If I am pregnant, will taking EC pills harm the fetus?** No. If you become pregnant anyway, the hormones don't harm the fetus.
- **My doctor has told me that I shouldn't take estrogen for medical reasons. Can I take EC pills?** Yes, you can. Plan B does not contain estrogen. If you receive a different medication that contains estrogen, talk with your doctor.
- **Can EC pills prevent sexually transmitted diseases?** No. EC medication does not protect you against HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases.

• **Are there any side effects of EC medication?**

EC pills can cause these temporary side effects:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Pain in the lower abdomen
- Severe tiredness
- Headache or dizziness
- Breast tenderness

If you vomit within 2 hours of taking an EC pill, call your healthcare provider to find out if you need to take another one.

• **Will EC medication affect my next period afterward?**

After taking EC medication, your next period may be a few days late or early. You may also notice a change in the flow. If you use birth control pills, be sure to take them for the rest of your cycle.

• **Can EC medication cause an abortion?** Emergency contraception medication is NOT the same as the abortion pill (RU-486). It will not prevent a pregnancy once the fertilized egg has implanted in the uterus.

• **Could EC pills keep me from getting pregnant in the future?** No. EC medication does not cause infertility, although it may make your cycles less regular for a short time.

• **How often can I use EC medication?** You can use EC medication as many times as you need to, but it should only be used in emergencies. It should not be used as a substitute for regular, long-term methods of contraception.

• **Are there alternatives to EC medication?**

Yes — ask your healthcare provider for advice about other forms or methods. Do NOT try to adjust the dose of birth control pills as an EC method without specific advice from your healthcare provider.

When to call the doctor

Call your healthcare provider if:

- You vomit within 2 hours after taking an EC pill. You may need to take another dose.
- You have heavy bleeding.
- Your next period is more than a week late. You may be pregnant.
- You have severe abdominal pain. This may be a sign of an **ectopic pregnancy**. An ectopic pregnancy is a fertilized egg that has attached outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube (the tube that connects the ovary to the uterus).

Hospital referral for EC medication

Do not delay in going to the hospital — the sooner you take EC medication, the more effective it is.
