

Emergency Contraception

What is it?

Emergency contraception may be used by a woman to try and prevent a pregnancy, after having unprotected sex (see below: *Who needs it?*). As the name implies, it is meant to be used only in emergencies, as it is not an on-going or long-term method of contraception*.

There are three methods but in Australia the 'progesterone only' method is mainly used.

A. The 'progesterone only' method.

Two pills of emergency contraception (Postinor-2 or Levonelle-2) containing a dose of a female hormone are taken. This is similar to taking a large quantity of the mini-pill.

B. The combined pill (Yuzpe) method, containing oestrogen and progesterone. This has been available for decades and is a high dose of the (combined) pill. It is not used very often now that the progesterone only method is available.

C. IUD insertion ** An IUD is only used as emergency contraception in special circumstances because usually it is used as a long-term method of contraception. Also, it may not be suitable for some women.

Progesterone only emergency contraception should be taken as soon as possible after unprotected intercourse (sex). It can be taken up to 120 hours after unprotected intercourse, but it is less effective the longer you wait. It will not cover any pregnancy risk that may have occurred earlier in the menstrual cycle.

It does not provide any on-going contraception and no protection against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

Who needs it?

If a woman has had sex with a man and:

- She has not used any contraception.
- A diaphragm has dislodged.
- A condom has broken or slipped off.
- She has had inadequate cover on the pill, e.g. missed pills, or is taking antibiotics, without using extra protection.
- 'Withdrawal' is used as a 'method' of contraception (the man withdraws his penis before he ejaculates/cums inside the vagina).

Where do I get it?

Progesterone only emergency contraception is available from pharmacies without a prescription. Family Planning clinics, hospital casualty departments and some doctors still provide emergency contraception directly.

How does hormonal Emergency Contraception work?

Emergency contraception mostly works to prevent or delay ovulation. It may also stop a fertilised egg from implanting (sticking) to the wall of the uterus. It may also interrupt the hormones needed for a pregnancy to continue.

How effective is hormonal Emergency Contraception?

Overall the progesterone only method is 85%% effective. The earlier it is taken, the more effective it is.

When to take hormonal Emergency Contraception?

The World Health Organisation recommends taking progesterone only emergency contraception:

- As soon as possible. Postinor-2 or Levonelle-2 pills can be taken together*** or 12 hours apart, depending on the instructions from the provider.
- It should be started within 120 hours of unprotected intercourse, but preferably as soon as possible.

What are the possible side effects?

- Some women may have spotting or bleeding within the first week of taking emergency contraception; most women will have their next period within 7 days of when it is usually due.
- If the combined pill is started after taking emergency contraception, then a period may be delayed.
- Research suggests that emergency contraception will not harm a continuing pregnancy.
- Nausea and vomiting are uncommon with the progesterone only method. If the combined method is used, anti nausea tablets should be provided.

(If vomiting does occur within two hours of taking a dose of emergency contraception, the dose must be repeated. If no anti nausea tablet was taken with the first dose, it should be used with the repeat dose.)

What should be done next?

- Pregnancy testing should be performed about 3 weeks after taking the emergency contraception, especially if the next period is more than 7 days late, is in any way unusual or is associated with more pain than usual.
- It is also important to have a sexually transmissible infection screen at your doctor, or family planning clinic, because some STIs do not give women or men symptoms but can cause long term complications, e.g. infertility.
- After taking emergency contraception, you should think about what contraception you would like to use in the future to prevent an unplanned pregnancy. A discussion with your doctor, or family planning practitioner, will provide you with the information you need.
- The combined pill or mini pill can be used for contraception straight after hormonal emergency contraception.

*FPV information pamphlets on on-going and long-term contraception are also available.

** See the *IUD* pamphlet for further information.

*** The recent WHO research suggests that it is just as effective taking the two pills at the same time.



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