

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

Fact Sheet

Emergency Contraception Prevents Unintended Pregnancy

- Emergency contraception (EC) is a method of birth control that has been available, although widely unknown among the general public, for more than 25 years. **When taken up to 72 hours after unprotected intercourse, it can reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy 75-89%.** It is more effective the sooner after unprotected intercourse it is taken.¹
- The most common method of EC is a concentrated dose of regular birth control pills that work to prevent pregnancy by:²
 - Delaying or inhibiting ovulation (release of an egg);
 - Interfering with sperms' ability to join with an egg, thus preventing fertilization; or
 - Inhibiting implantation of a fertilized egg to the uterus.
- **EC cannot be used to terminate or harm an existing pregnancy.** It should not be confused with mifepristone (RU-486), the early option for abortion.³
- Widespread use of EC could help prevent an estimated 1.5 million unintended pregnancies in the U.S. each year,⁴ including at least 500,000 of which would end in an abortion.⁵

Women Need Easier Access EC

- Most women in the U.S. need a prescription to obtain EC. Yet, many women cannot get a quick appointment, especially on weekends or holidays. Pharmacies may not be open to fill prescriptions when women need them or they may not carry EC as part of their regular stock.
- **Individual pharmacists have refused to fill prescriptions for EC.**⁶ In Texas in 2004, there were 3 publicized cases of women who had pharmacists refuse to fill their prescriptions for EC or other birth control. Other cases have been documented throughout the U.S.
- The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has denied over-the-counter status to EC for more than 2 years- despite a 23-4 recommendation by its own advisory panel to allow EC to be sold over-the-counter.⁷

EC is Safe

- EC is approved as a contraceptive by the FDA and has no known serious side effects. Even women who cannot regularly use oral contraceptives may safely use EC.⁸
- EC is available without a prescription in more than 25 countries.⁹ In the U.S., only Alaska, California, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Washington allow pharmacists to dispense EC without a doctor's prescription.¹⁰
- **The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that EC be available over-the-counter in the U.S.** and encourages doctors to give advance prescriptions for the medication to patients during routine office visits.¹¹

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- 1 ACOG (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) News Release. *Medical Groups Set the Record Straight on Emergency Contraception*. May 4, 2004.
[Online, accessed April 11, 2006, http://www.acog.org/from_home/publications/press_releases/nr05-04-04-3.cfm].
 - 2 ACOG Report. *A Closer Look at Emergency Contraception*. August 2001.
 - 3 ACOG News Release. *ACOG to Testify Before FDA In Support of Over-the-Counter Emergency Contraception*. December 15, 2003.
[Online, accessed April 11, 2006, http://www.acog.org/from_home/publications/press_releases/nr12-15-03.cfm].
 - 4 Planned Parenthood Federation of America Fact Sheet. *Emergency Contraception*. January 2006.
[Online, accessed April 13, 2006, <http://www.ppfa.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/ec/factemergency-contraception.xml>].
 - 5 *Medical Groups Set the Record Straight on Emergency Contraception*.
 - 6 *Emergency Contraception*.
 - 7 *Emergency Contraception*.
 - 8 *Emergency Contraception*.
 - 9 The Alan Guttmacher Institute. *Issues in Brief: Emergency Contraception: Improving Access*. 2003 Series, No. 3.
 - 10 The Alan Guttmacher Institute. *State Policies in Brief: Emergency Contraception*. April 2006.
 - 11 ACOG News Release. *Statement of The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists On the Failure of the FDA To Approve OTC Status for Plan B*. May 7, 2004.
[Online, accessed April 11, 2006, http://www.acog.org/from_home/publications/press_releases/nr05-07-04.cfm].