YOUR GUIDE TO

Emergency contraception

For when you've had unprotected sex and you don't want to become pregnant.
Emergency contraception

If you have had sex without using contraception, or if your contraception might have failed, you can use emergency contraception.

If you act quickly emergency contraception will usually prevent pregnancy.

Where can I get emergency contraception?
- any GP who provides contraceptive services
- any family planning clinic
- any young person’s clinic or Brook clinic
- most genito-urinary medicine (GUM)/sexual health clinics
- most NHS walk-in centres (in England only)
- some hospital accident and emergency departments (phone first)
- some pharmacies.

You can buy emergency contraception from:
- most pharmacies if you are 16 years old or over
- some privately run clinics, including British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPA).

All the above and treatment you receive is confidential – whatever your reason is.

Method 1: Emergency pills

What’s involved?
Emergency contraceptive pills must be taken within three days (72 hours) of having unprotected sex. They are more effective the sooner they are taken. However, they are not as effective as other regular methods of contraception such as the pill or condoms.

There are two types of hormone emergency pill:
- progestogen-only pills - a packet of two pills
- combined (oestrogen and progestogen) pills - a packet of four pills.

Both types of emergency pill are taken in the same way. The first dose (one pill if taking progestogen-only pills or two pills if taking combined pills) should be started as soon as possible after unprotected sex. The second dose is taken 12 hours later.

How do emergency pills work?
The pills may:
- stop an egg being released (ovulation)
- delay ovulation
- stop a fertilized egg settling in your womb (implantation).

How effective are emergency pills?
Emergency contraceptive pills are very effective. If taken within 24 hours of unprotected sexual intercourse, they will prevent at least three out of four pregnancies that would have occurred if no emergency contraception had been taken.

Emergency pills are more effective the sooner the first dose is taken after sex.

Research shows that progestogen-only methods are more effective than using combined estrogen and progestogen emergency pills.

Can anyone use emergency pills?
Most women can use emergency pills. However, if you are taking certain prescribed or over the counter medicines, or suffer from certain illnesses such as migraine, some emergency pills will not be suitable. Tell your doctor, pharmacist or family planning clinic about any medicines you are taking or any illnesses you may have.

What are the disadvantages?
You may feel sick or vomit. This is much less likely with progestogen-only emergency pills.

Do I need to see a doctor or nurse after I’ve taken them?
Not usually. However, if you do not get a normal period within three weeks, think you may be pregnant or want to talk about using regular contraception, go and see a doctor or nurse.

Can the emergency pills fail?
Emergency pills are very effective and should be taken as soon as possible after unprotected sex. They are most effective if the first dose is taken within 24 hours. They are most likely to fail if:
- you take the first dose more than 72 hours after unprotected sex
- you vomit within three hours of taking the pills
- you forget to take the second set of pills or take them late.

- you have had unprotected sex at another time since your last period or since taking the pills.

What if I vomit within three hours of taking the pills?
Speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. They may give you extra pills and a medicine to stop you vomiting again. Or they may suggest having a copper IUD fitted (Method 2).

If the emergency pills fail will they harm the baby?
Emergency pills have not been shown to affect a pregnancy or harm a developing baby.

Can I use emergency pills regularly?
Emergency pills are not as effective as using other contraceptive methods regularly. If you do not want to become pregnant you should always use contraception when you have sex. You can take emergency pills more than once, but this is not necessary, but may disrupt your periods. If you want advice on any method of contraception ask your doctor or family planning clinic.

Can I get emergency pills in advance?
Yes, if you are going on holiday or are worried about your contraceptive method failing. Ask your doctor or family planning clinic about this.

Can I get emergency pills from a pharmacist?
Yes. You can buy emergency pills if you are aged 16 or over. They are also available free from some pharmacies in the UK. For more information on where to get emergency contraception on the NHS.

Method 2: The Copper IUD

What’s involved?
A doctor or a nurse fits a copper IUD in your womb within five days of you having unprotected sex or within five days of the earliest time you could have released an egg (ovulation).

How does the IUD work?
It may stop an egg being fertilized or implanting in your womb.

How effective is a copper IUD?
Very effective, almost 100%. It can also provide long-term contraception if you want.

Can anyone use an IUD?
The IUD is not suitable for all women. If you are at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (by having more than one sexual partner or your partner having other partners) you could get a pelvic infection. You may have screening tests done at the time the IUD is fitted and you may also be given some antibiotics to prevent a pelvic infection.
An IUD may be suitable if you:
- are too late to take emergency pills (over 72 hours after unprotected sex)
- do not want to or cannot take hormones
- want to use the most effective method of emergency contraception
- want the IUD as a long-term method of contraception.

Q: What should I do if I think there’s a problem?
A: If you are worried about anything to do with your emergency contraception, see your doctor, nurse or pharmacist as soon as you can.

Q: Do I need to see a doctor or nurse after the IUD is fitted?
A: It is important to see a doctor or nurse three to four weeks after the IUD is fitted, whether or not you have had a period. This is to check you are not pregnant and discuss any problems.

Q: When can I have the IUD removed?
A: If you do not want to keep the IUD as your regular contraceptive method, it can be removed during your next period.

More questions about emergency contraception

Q: Does emergency contraception cause an abortion?
A: No. Emergency contraception may stop ovulation or fertilisation of an egg, or stop a fertilised egg from implanting in the womb. Medical research and legal opinion are quite clear that emergency contraception (pills or an IUD) prevents pregnancy and is not abortion. Abortion can only take place after a fertilised egg has implanted in the womb.

Sexually transmitted infections
Male and female condoms can help protect against sexually transmitted infections. Male latex condoms should carry the BSI Kitemark (BS EN 400) and European CE mark. Diaphragms and caps may also protect against some sexually transmitted infections.

How do I find a family planning doctor or clinic?
Contraception is free through the National Health Service.
- You can find lists of GPs in libraries, post offices and advice centres or from helplines, health authorities or health boards. Doctors who give contraceptive advice have the letter ‘C’ after their names.
- You can get details of your nearest family planning or sexual health clinic or NHSS walk-in centre (in England only) from your phone book, health centre, hospital, midwife or health visitor advice centre, helpline, health authority or health board.
- Young people can phone Brook on 0800 0145 023 for details of the nearest Brook clinic offering contraceptive advice.
- You can find out about all clinics from fpa’s CES helpline on 020 7837 4044 or visit the website www.fpa.org.uk

How fpa can help you
fpa’s nationwide Contraceptive Education Service (CES)Helpline is open Monday to Friday and provides:
- confidential information and advice on contraception and sexual and reproductive health
- details of family planning clinics, sexual health clinics and other sexual health services
- a wide range of leaflets

fpa UK
2-12 Penpole Road
London N1 9PH
Phone 020 7837 4044
9am to 7pm

fpa Scotland
Unit 10
The Business Centre
75 Main Road Glasgow G30 7RA
Phone 0141 574 5088
9am to 3pm

fpa Northern Ireland
11 University Street
Belfast BT7 1DF
Phone 030 90 325 498
9am to 3pm

Ask fpa for a free copy of the following leaflets:
- Your guide to contraception (all methods)
- The combined pill
- The progesterone-only pill
- Injections and implants
- The IUD
- The IUS
- Male and female condoms
- Diaphragms and caps
- Natural family planning
- Male and female sterilisation
- After you’ve had your baby
- A guide to family planning services

A final word
This leaflet can only give you basic information about emergency contraception. The information is based on the evidence and medical opinion available at the time this leaflet was printed. Different people may give you different advice on certain points.

Remember – contact your doctor or a family planning clinic or a pharmacist if you are worried or unsure about anything.