your guide to emergency contraception

Helping you choose the method of contraception that is best for you
Emergency contraception

If you have had unprotected sex, that is, sex without using contraception, or when you think your contraception might have failed, you can use emergency contraception. There are two methods of emergency contraception:
- hormonal emergency contraception (known as the emergency contraceptive pill), and
- the copper IUD. The IUD is the most effective.

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If you act quickly, emergency contraception will usually prevent pregnancy.

**Does emergency contraception cause an abortion?**

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 judgement are quite clear that emergency contraception (the pill or an IUD) prevents pregnancy and is not abortion. Abortion can only take place after a fertilised egg has implanted in the womb.
has implanted in the womb. People who believe life begins when the egg is fertilised may not wish to use the emergency contraception methods outlined in this leaflet.

Where can I get emergency contraception?

You can get the emergency pill and the emergency IUD free from:
- any general practice that provides contraceptive services
- any family planning clinic
- any young person's clinic or Brook clinic
- any sexual health clinic
- some genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics.

You can also get the emergency pill free from:
- most NHS walk-in centres (in England only)
- some pharmacies (there may be age restrictions)
- most NHS minor injuries units
- some hospital accident and emergency departments (phone first to check if they provide this service).

You can buy the emergency pill from:
- most pharmacies if you are 16-years-old or over
- some privately run clinics, such as bpas and Marie Stopes.

The price will vary but at the pharmacy it will cost around £26.

All the advice and treatment you receive is confidential – wherever you receive it.
Method 1: The emergency contraceptive pill

What is the emergency pill?
The emergency contraceptive pill is a tablet containing progestogen, a hormone which is similar to the natural progesterone women produce in their ovaries.

How do I take it?
You will be given 1 pill to take. It should be taken within 3 days (72 hours) of having unprotected sex. It is more effective the sooner it is taken.

How does the emergency pill work?
The emergency pill is most likely to:
- stop an egg being released (ovulation)
- delay ovulation.
It may also stop a fertilised egg settling in your womb (implanting).
How effective is the emergency pill?
It is very effective and is more effective the sooner it is taken after sex. However, it is not as effective as using other methods of contraception regularly and does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections.

Of the pregnancies that could be expected to have occurred if no emergency contraception had been used the emergency pill will prevent:
• up to 95% if taken within 24 hours
• up to 85% if taken between 25–48 hours
• up to 58% if taken between 49–72 hours.
If the emergency pill is taken after 72 hours it is not known how effective it will be.

Who can use the emergency pill?
Most women can use the emergency pill. This includes women who are breastfeeding and women who can’t use estrogens – the same hormone that is used in the combined pill or the contraceptive patch. However, if you are taking certain prescribed medicines, or complementary medicines such as St John’s Wort, you will need special advice and the dose of the emergency pill may need to be increased. Or you may need to use the copper IUD (see Method 2: The copper IUD on page 11).

What are the side effects?
• There are no serious short- or long-term effects from using the emergency pill.
• Some women may feel sick, dizzy or tired, or may get headaches, breast tenderness or abdominal pain.
• A very small number of women will vomit.
• It can disrupt your periods (see How will the emergency pill affect my next period? on page 7).
How will the emergency pill affect my next period?

- Your period is likely to either come on time or be a few days early or late. For some women the period can be up to a week late or sometimes even longer.
- You may have some irregular bleeding between taking the emergency pill and getting your next period. This can range from spotting to being quite heavy.

Do I need to see a doctor or nurse after I’ve taken the pill?

Not usually, but do go and see a doctor or nurse if:
- you think you may be pregnant
- your next period is more than 7 days late
- your period is shorter or lighter than your usual period
- you have any sudden or unusual pain in your lower abdomen.

These could be signs of an ectopic pregnancy – a pregnancy that occurs outside the womb, usually in a fallopian tube. Although this is not common, it is very serious.

You should also see a doctor or nurse if:
- you want to talk about using regular contraception
- you are worried that you might have caught a sexually transmitted infection.

Can the emergency pill fail?

The emergency pill is very effective and should be taken as soon as possible after unprotected sex. However, in some women it fails and they become pregnant even though the pill was taken correctly.