

# HEALTH FACTS ABOUT EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILLS

Emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) are contraceptives taken after unprotected intercourse or contraceptive failure (such as condom breakage) to prevent unplanned pregnancy.

- Research has shown that progestin-only ECPs—the most common and effective type of ECPs—work primarily by delaying or preventing the release of an egg from the ovary.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, ECPs may interfere with the movement of sperm by thickening the cervical mucus.<sup>2,3</sup> Both mechanisms would prevent a sperm from meeting and fertilizing an egg. Researchers have designed animal experiments specifically to test whether progestin-only ECPs prevent fertilized eggs from implanting in the uterine lining. These studies show that progestin-only ECPs work by interfering with ovulation, thereby preventing fertilization. They do not disrupt events or processes, such as implantation, that occur after fertilization.<sup>4,5</sup> Human studies have shown that progestin-only ECPs disrupt ovulation in ways that make fertilization unlikely.<sup>1</sup> Further, studies have shown that progestin-only ECPs have no effect on the uterine lining that would prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>
  - Progestin-only ECPs will not interrupt a pregnancy, by any definition of the beginning of pregnancy.<sup>10</sup> Groups of medical experts such as the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the US National Institutes of Health, the American Medical Women's Association, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists define pregnancy as beginning with the implantation of a fertilized egg in the lining of a woman's uterus.<sup>11,12,13,14</sup>
  - ECPs can be formulated with the hormone progestin alone or with estrogen and progestin combined.
- Progestin-only ECPs are more effective than ECPs containing estrogen and progestin.<sup>15</sup> There are dedicated progestin-only ECPs on the market. In the United States, Plan B<sup>®</sup> is a product made specifically for emergency contraception and containing only progestin. Additionally, ordinary birth control pills can be taken in higher doses and in specified regimens<sup>16</sup> for an emergency-contraceptive effect.
- ECPs contain the same hormones as ordinary birth control pills.
  - When a woman is already pregnant, ECPs do not affect the pregnancy and will not disturb embryo development if they are accidentally used.<sup>17,18,19</sup>
  - ECPs are generally taken in two doses. The first dose can be taken within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse.<sup>20,21</sup> A second dose is taken 12 hours after the first. Studies have also demonstrated that taking both doses of progestin-only ECPs at the same time is as effective as taking them 12 hours apart.<sup>22</sup> Because a single dose is easier than two doses to take properly, some countries have approved the single-dose regimen. ECPs retain some effectiveness up to 120 hours after unprotected intercourse. However, the sooner ECPs are taken, the more likely they are to be effective.<sup>22</sup>
  - ECPs are safe and effective according to the FDA<sup>13</sup>. They will not cause birth defects if a woman inadvertently takes them while pregnant.<sup>11</sup> Repeated use of ECPs is not harmful even in the same cycle.<sup>23</sup>
  - Studies have shown that adult women and teenagers who have readily available ECPs are no more likely to engage in unprotected sex or abandon use of other contraceptive methods than women who do not have easy access to the pills.<sup>24,25,26</sup>
  - By preventing unwanted pregnancy, emergency contraception may reduce the need for induced abortion.<sup>27</sup>

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