

Emergency Contraception Fact Sheet for Village Health Teams

What is emergency contraception?

Emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) can be used to prevent unwanted pregnancy *after* unprotected or under-protected sex.* ECPs are *not* abortion pills; they *do not* cause an abortion.

The ECPs distributed in public health centers in Uganda are a special dose of progestin (Levonorgestrel or LNG) in pill form. They may come as one 1.5 mg pill or as two pills of 0.75 mg each. The two pills are labeled to be taken 12 hours apart but can be taken together as soon after unprotected sex as possible. Both the one-pill and two-pill packs are considered one dose of ECPs.

Who are ECPs for?

ECPs can be used by all women of child-bearing age including young women (married or unmarried) who have had unprotected or under-protected sex—meaning they forgot to use their regular contraceptive method, a condom broke, or they did not use a method, and includes cases of rape, forced sex, and defilement. Adolescents are especially vulnerable and should receive information and counseling about ECPs.

How ECPs work

ECPs cannot interrupt a pregnancy. Pregnancy cannot take place unless the (male's) sperm meets the (female's) egg and fertilizes it. This process takes up to five days after unprotected sex. ECPs interfere with this process by preventing or delaying the egg from being released from the ovary so that the sperm cannot meet it.

When to use ECPs

ECPs, sometimes referred to as “the morning-after pill,” should be taken as soon after unprotected sex as possible, but can be taken up to 5 days after unprotected sex. ECPs are more effective the sooner they are taken after unprotected sex.

* For simplicity, “unprotected” is used throughout.



How often can ECPs be used?

ECPs can be used as often as needed. However, because they are not as effective as other contraceptive methods, continuous use of a regular method is recommended for ongoing pregnancy prevention. Even though repeated use of ECPs is safe, a woman does not need to take ECPs more than once in 24 hours if she has repeated unprotected sex within 24 hours.

ECP side effects

ECPs are safe for all women. They have no long-term side effects and cannot cause infertility. Minor, short-term side effects may occur. These include:

- 1. Changes to the menstrual pattern.** Most women who use ECPs have their next menstrual period within one week of the expected time. A woman may get her next period early or her next period may be longer. A few women may have light bleeding after taking ECPs. After taking ECPs, if a woman has not had a menstrual period by one week after she would have normally expected it, she may be pregnant and should seek care at a health center.
- 2. Upset stomach and vomiting.** Up to 1-in-4 ECP users will have an upset stomach, which stops on its own. One-in-10 women may vomit. If a woman vomits within 3 hours after taking an ECP dose, she should take another dose.
- 3. Other symptoms** may include headaches, abdominal pain, breast tenderness, and fatigue or dizziness. These generally disappear within 24 hours.

Key Messages

- A woman who does not want to get pregnant should consider using ECPs any time she has sex that was not protected by any other contraceptive method.
- Every woman should know where to get ECPs in her community and should use them as soon after unprotected sex as possible. A woman can keep ECPs on hand in case she has unprotected sex in the future.
- ECPs are not as effective as using a regular contraceptive method. Continuous use of a regular contraceptive method is recommended for ongoing pregnancy prevention.
- ECPs cannot cause abortion. They delay release of the egg so that it does not meet live sperm. After fertilization takes place, ECPs cannot undo it. ECPs are *not* abortion pills.
- If a woman has not had a menstrual period within one week of when it is expected, she should go to a health center to find out if she is be pregnant.
- ECPs are safe for ALL women and girls of child-bearing age. They do not cause a woman to become infertile.
- ECPs are safe and can prevent unintended pregnancies if taken more than once—even in the same menstrual cycle. However, VHTs should advise clients with repeated use of ECPs to graduate to use a regular contraceptive method.
- ECPs do not prevent or treat sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Condoms should be used to prevent transmission of STIs. If a person has an STI, s/he must go to a qualified health service provider for treatment.
- Any woman or girl who experiences rape, forced sex, or defilement—whether by stranger, relative, or someone she knows—should be counseled, given ECPs immediately, and referred for post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV infection.

Tell clients during counseling

ECPs are

- Pills taken after unprotected sex to prevent pregnancy.
- Safe and effective.
- Prevent or delay release of egg.
- Do not cause an abortion.

Use

- Work best when taken as soon after unprotected sex as possible.
- Can be taken up to 5 days after unprotected sex.
- Take another dose if you vomit within 3 hours after taking ECPs

What to expect

- May cause upset stomach or vomiting.
- May cause changes in menstrual cycle.
- Do not cause long-term side effects or health problems.

Key points

- Do not prevent pregnancy the next time you have sex.
- See a health care provider if you don't get your next period within 1 week of when it's expected.
- Continuous use of a regular contraceptive method is more effective.
- Consider a regular method you could use continuously.
- ECPs do not protect against STIs—use condoms to prevent STIs. Seek treatment if you may have been exposed to HIV or other STIs.

Where to get ECPs

- Public hospital or health centre; or private hospital or clinic
- Pharmacy
- VHT members (trained in FP, including ECPs)