



Emergency Contraception Over-the-Counter: The Importance of Expanding Access for Teens

Emergency contraception (EC) is a safe, effective back-up birth control method that can prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex or contraceptive failure. Emergency contraceptive products can safely be used every time a woman has unprotected sex or experiences contraceptive failure. However, emergency contraception does not protect against future acts of unprotected sex and is not as effective as other birth control methods. It also does not protect against HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections.

Emergency contraception is safe for teens to use without a health care professional

- Emergency contraception is a safe and effective method of contraception. Two studies, Raymond et al. and Cremer et al., conclude that adolescents understand instructions on medical labels as well as adults on the key points necessary for safe and effective use of emergency contraception.^{1,2}
- Emergency contraception has a positive safety profile, with public health experts and health care providers supporting over-the-counter (OTC) access for women of all ages.
- Emergency contraception is most effective the sooner it is taken when used within 120 hours after unprotected sex or contraceptive failure.

Improved access to emergency contraception has been shown to increase use

- Currently, 66% of women who use emergency contraception get it OTC from their pharmacy.³

Over the counter access to emergency contraception is important in preventing unintended pregnancy among teens

- According to the latest statistics, there were about 750,000 pregnancies among teens 15-19 in 2006.⁴
- More than half (67%) of teen pregnancies are unplanned.⁵

Over-the-counter emergency contraception does not preclude parent-teen communication about sex

- Today's youth are closer to their parents than any other generations. Teens often turn to their parents or other parental figures for assistance and advice.⁶
- One third of teens say parents influence their decisions around sex.⁷
- Teens are more likely to get their information about birth control, menstruation, pregnancy and STIs from family members than friends and 18% of girls think that the best way to learn about sex and health related issues is through family.⁸
- Research shows that *requiring minors* to tell a parent before accessing contraception delays or prevents them from seeking reproductive health services, but does not reduce their sexual activity.⁹

Emergency contraception provides an additional contraceptive option to prevent unintended pregnancies for teens

- More needs to be done to help teens understand what puts them at risk of unintended pregnancy, how regular contraceptive use can reduce that risk, and what to do if that fails. EC OTC is one way to make it possible for individuals and couples to act on that knowledge.
- The available scientific research suggests that use of emergency contraception – whether or not a woman is supervised by a licensed prescriber – is *not* associated with increased risk for future STIs or sexual risk taking behavior among teens.

Emergency contraception is not the same thing as the abortion pill

- The abortion pill (mifepristone or RU-486) is not the same thing as emergency contraception. While the abortion pill terminates an early, established pregnancy, emergency contraception works to prevent pregnancy by inhibiting or delaying ovulation.

Currently, there are two EC products available over-the-counter to women 17 and older, Plan B One-Step and Next Choice. Both products can be purchased at the pharmacy counter and cost \$35 to \$50. Another EC product, ella, is prescription-only for women of all ages. Title X clinics serving low-income clients provide emergency contraception and related care on a sliding fee scale based on ability to pay.

¹ Raymond E, Engle K, Tolley E, Ricciotti N, Arnold M, Park S. Comprehension of a prototype emergency contraception package label by female adolescents. *Contraception* 79 (2009) 199-205.

² Cremer M, Holland E, Adams B, Klausner D, Nichols S, Ram R, Alonzo T. Adolescent comprehension of emergency contraception in New York City. *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 113-4 (April 2009). 840-844.

³ Kavanaugh, Megan. *Emergency contraception use and counseling after changes in United States prescription status.* *Fertility and Sterility*. 30 June 2011 (Vol. 95, Issue 8, Pages 2578-2581).

⁴ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. *Fast Facts: Teen Sexual Behavior and Contraceptive Use: Data from Youth Risk Behavior Survey June 2010.*

⁵ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. *Unplanned Pregnancy Rates in the United States, 1981 - 2002*<http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/national-data/pdf/Unplanned-pregnancy-rates-by-age.pdf>

⁶ TECHsex USA: Youth Sexuality and Reproductive Health in the Digital Age. March 2011. http://www.isis-inc.org/ISISpaper_techsx_usa.pdf

⁷ Albert, Bill. *With One Voice (Lite): 2009 Survey of Adults and Teens on Parental Influence, Abstinence, Contraception and the Increase in Teen Birth Rate.* Spring 2009. http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/WOV_Lite_2009.pdf

⁸ TECHsex USA: Youth Sexuality and Reproductive Health in the Digital Age

⁹ Center for Reproductive Rights. *Adolescents Access to Reproductive Health Services and Information.* September 2010. <http://reproductiverights.org/en/project/adolescents-access-to-reproductive-health-services-and-information>