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Emergency Contraception

What is Emergency Contraception?

If you've had unprotected sex - sex without using contraception - or think your contraception has failed, you can use emergency contraception to prevent pregnancy.

There are two methods:

1. Hormonal emergency contraception (known as the emergency pill). This contains the hormone progestogen. It's given as a single pill.
2. The copper IUD, which is fitted in the womb

How does emergency contraception work?

The emergency pill and IUD work by stopping or delaying the release of an egg (ovulation) or preventing fertilisation or stopping a fertilised egg from settling in your womb.

Emergency contraception does not cause abortion.

How reliable is Emergency Contraception?

It's very effective in preventing pregnancy.

The sooner it's taken after sex, the more effective the emergency pill is. It's about 95 per cent effective when taken within 24 hours. However, it's not as effective as using other methods of contraception regularly. The IUD is the most effective method of emergency contraception. It will prevent up to 99 per cent of pregnancies expected to occur if no emergency method had been used

Emergency contraception needs to be used as soon as possible after unprotected sex.

The emergency pill must be used within three days (72 hours) of unprotected sex. The IUD can be used up to five days after unprotected sex, at any time in the menstrual cycle, as long as this is the only unprotected sex that has occurred since your last period. If you have had unprotected sex more than once since your last period, it can be fitted up to five days after the earliest time you could have released an egg (ovulation). The IUD can be removed at your next period

Advantages: No serious side-effects. The IUD is the most effective method and, if left in place, will provide ongoing regular contraception. Easily available.

Disadvantages: Some women may feel sick, tired or may get headaches, breast tenderness or abdominal pain after using the emergency pill - these symptoms are not common and don't last long. The emergency pill may disrupt your periods for a short time.

Most women can use emergency contraception, but not every woman can use an IUD.

Other things to consider: Emergency contraception does not protect you against sexually transmitted infections. The emergency pill does not provide ongoing contraception. The IUD can be left in place to provide ongoing regular contraception. Some medicines may affect how the emergency pill works - always check with the doctor or pharmacist. If you're worried about your contraceptive method failing, if you're going on holiday or cannot get emergency contraception easily, you can get emergency pills in advance.

Myth: You can't use the emergency pill more than once

Fact: Not true - you can use the emergency pill as many times as you need to and more than once in any one menstrual cycle, but it shouldn't be used instead of regular contraception

Myth: The emergency pill contains high doses of hormones and is dangerous

Fact: Not true - it contains the hormone progestogen, which is very safe to use Top Where can I get emergency contraception?

Emergency contraception is free on the NHS from contraception clinics, sexual health clinics, genitourinary medicine clinics, walk-in centres or your GP surgery. The emergency pill can is also available from pharmacies. If you're aged 16 or over, you can buy the emergency pill.

Advice And Support

Call FPA's helpline on 0845 122 8690.

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