



EC101: WHAT CAMPUS STAKEHOLDERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

Students on your campus may approach you about setting up direct peer-to-peer distribution of emergency contraception and other sexual health products. Here's what you need to know.



What is EC?

Emergency Contraception (EC)* prevents pregnancy before it happens.

- EC is sometimes called the morning-after pill or Plan B.
- EC is not the same as the abortion pill, which ends a pregnancy. EC is similar to regular birth control.
- It can prevent pregnancy up to 5 days after sex if contraception isn't used or doesn't work, or in cases of sexual assault. It's best to use it as soon as possible after sex.

There are two kinds of EC pills:

- Progestin-only EC (such as Plan B One-Step®, Take Action®, and others) is available without prescription on store shelves
- Ulipristal acetate EC (ella®) is available only by prescription



Is EC safe?

Yes, EC is extremely safe.

- EC pills are safer than many other non-prescription drugs, such as Tylenol®.
 - Side effects (such as nausea, headache, and changes to the next period) are generally mild and go away on their own. Many people don't experience any side effects at all.
 - EC won't harm or end a pregnancy if someone takes it when they are already pregnant.
- Taking EC – even multiple times within the same month or year – does not affect future fertility.



How does EC work?

EC prevents or delays ovulation (release of an egg from the ovary).

- If there's no egg, there's nothing for sperm to fertilize and pregnancy can't occur.
- If someone is already pregnant, taking EC will not harm or end the pregnancy.
- The different types of EC pills should not be used together - they could cancel each other out.

** This fact sheet focuses on EC pills. However, a copper IUD inserted within 5 days after unprotected sex can also be used as EC and can prevent pregnancy for at least 12 years if kept in place.*



How effective is EC at preventing pregnancy?

The exact effectiveness of EC is hard to calculate, but here are some things to know:

- ella® is more effective than Plan B One-Step® and other non-prescription brands. EC pills may not work as well for people with higher body weight.
 - Plan B One-Step® and other OTC brands may be ineffective for people over 165 lbs.
 - Some research suggests that taking two doses of Plan B One-Step® may be effective for those in this weight range; it won't hurt, and it might help.
 - ella® is a more effective option, but may not work for people over 195 lbs.
- EC is an important option that should be available to everyone, but it isn't meant to be a long-term substitute for regular contraception because it's not as effective.



Does EC encourage young people to have more sex or riskier sex?

No - several studies have shown that making EC more available does not increase sexual risk-taking.

- Using EC reduces sexual risk by reducing the likelihood of pregnancy, but it does not prevent sexually transmitted infections.
- Providing sexual health information and services to young people equips them to take charge of their health and safety.



Where is EC available?

EC is available at pharmacies, stores, and online.

- Progestin-only EC (Plan B One-Step®, Take Action® and others) is available without prescription on store shelves.
 - There are no age or gender restrictions. Anyone of any age can buy it and no one should be asked for ID.
 - Young people should know that some stores still keep EC behind the counter or ask for ID, even though that's no longer required by government regulations.
- ella® is available by prescription from family planning clinics and family doctors. They can also write a prescription for Plan B One-Step® (and its generic forms) if needed for insurance purposes.
- Both types of EC pills can be prescribed and ordered online through services such as Nurx or Planned Parenthood Direct.
- Not all online EC providers offer next-day delivery; since EC is more effective the sooner it is taken, it's a great idea to have EC on hand before it's needed.



How much does EC cost?

EC can be expensive, and the price may be a barrier.

- The non-prescription type of EC (Plan B One-Step®, Take Action® and others) costs:
 - \$35-\$50 in stores
 - \$11-\$25 online, often without next-day shipping.
- ella® costs \$45-\$50 without insurance.
- Both types of EC pills should be covered by insurance, but in most states, you need a prescription for insurance coverage (even for the non-prescription type of EC like Plan B).



Why is access to EC important for young people?

The sooner EC is taken after sex, the more likely it is to work.

- EC provides a last chance to prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex, coerced sex, or sexual assault.
- EC helps young people maintain bodily autonomy and prevent unwanted pregnancy.
- All young people should have access to EC, regardless of gender.
 - Purchasing EC when it's needed is an important way for young men to share responsibility for pregnancy prevention.
 - Transgender youth may be at risk for pregnancy, and should be able to get EC any time they need it.



What are some common barriers to accessing EC?

Young people often face barriers to getting EC when they need it.

- **Information:** Lack of accurate and comprehensive sex education in general, and lack of knowledge about EC.
- **Cost:** Progestin-only EC costs \$40-50 at pharmacies, putting it out of reach for many students.
- **Convenience:** Limited hours at pharmacies and student health centers, especially at night and on weekends when need for EC might be greatest.
- **Travel:** Long distances to pharmacies and clinics, and lack of transportation.
- **Institutional:** Pharmacies, clinics, and student health centers not stocking EC on the shelf, enforcing outdated age restrictions, or refusing to sell EC.
- **Interpersonal:** Gatekeepers at pharmacies, clinics, and student health centers making students feel judged, embarrassed, or intimidated when seeking EC.
- **Trauma:** Students who experience sexual assault may not feel able to speak out or seek medical help, particularly if reporting and an investigation would be required.



Is it legal to sell EC in a vending machine?

Generally yes – most states do not restrict the sale of OTC products in vending machines

- In most states, the law is silent on the question of whether OTC medications (including EC) can be sold in vending machines – so in most places, there are no laws prohibiting this. Consult our legal and policy analysis guide to learn more about your state.
- Only three states (Connecticut, Maryland, Oklahoma) currently restrict the sale of EC in vending machines. The law in Tennessee is unclear.
- Campuses across the country - including Brandeis, Columbia, Dartmouth, George Mason, Harvard, San Diego State, Shippensburg, University of California (UC) Davis, UC Los Angeles – have installed EC vending machines in the past several years. Others are working on this right now.



Why are EC vending machines a good idea?

Vending machines make EC easier to get, and that helps students prevent pregnancy.

Timely Access

- Time is of the essence when it comes to EC – the sooner EC is used, the more likely it is to work.
- Vending machines allow students to get EC and other sexual health products when student health services and pharmacies may be closed, especially during nights and weekends.

Privacy

- EC can be sold in vending machines, usually along with condoms, menstrual products, and other items that students need. No one needs to know what a student is buying from the machine.
- These machines are often placed in spaces that offer privacy, such as single-user bathrooms.
- Vending machines offer a confidential option for students to access EC, which supports their autonomy and helps them avoid stigma and judgement that they may encounter at the pharmacy or campus health services.

Cost

- Some EC sold through vending machines costs less than in pharmacies.
- In [Vengo machines](#), the price for Plan B One-Step is about \$48 (similar to store prices), but a generic form, AfterPill, costs \$25 in the machine vs \$40 for generics in a store.
- On campuses that install their own vending machines, the price for EC is usually far less (\$11-\$20).
- Many campus vending machines accept credit cards and campus cards.



How can campus stakeholders improve access to EC?

Campus decision-makers play an important role in supporting EC access.

- Support installation of at least one vending machine on campus that includes EC, condoms, and other sexual health products.
 - Do all you can to make it affordable, including stocking a generic EC product in the machine and subsidizing costs if possible.
 - Consider convenience, accessibility (including for students with disabilities), and privacy.
- Learn your student health center's EC policies and practices. Encourage student health centers to stock both types of EC pills and offer them at no (or low) cost to any students who need them
- Be sure that health center staff provide nonjudgmental, respectful care.
- Encourage on-campus stores and pharmacies to sell EC on the shelf.
- Help make EC affordable for all students – if possible, create policies to provide EC at no (or subsidized) cost and include it in student health coverage.
- Have a physician or advanced practice clinician provide standing orders for EC at the campus pharmacy so it can be covered by insurance.

The bottom line:

Improving access to EC on campus is an important way that you can support students in taking care of their reproductive health needs and achieving their personal, educational, and professional goals. Contact the American Society for Emergency Contraception (kelly@americansocietyforec.org) for more information on how to improve access to EC on your campus.