

# EC101: WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION



## 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<sup>®</sup>, Take Action<sup>®</sup>, and others) is available without prescription on store shelves.
- Ulipristal acetate EC (ella<sup>®</sup>) 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
  - 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®, AfterPill® 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 value brands) 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®, AfterPill® 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.



## How can parents support teens who may need EC?

**Talk with your teen. Make sure they know that EC is available, when to use it, and how to get it.**

- Consider buying EC pills to have on hand for your teen or their partner before it's needed – the sooner EC is taken after sex, the more likely it is to work.
- Have conversations about contraception (including EC) and consent early and often.
- Visit [Power to Decide](#) for some helpful resources on talking with teens about sex and contraception.



## My child's college installed a vending machine that sells EC. Why is this a good idea?

### Vending machines make EC easier to get – which helps students prevent pregnancy

- 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.

### 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 who need to access EC, which supports their autonomy and helps them avoid stigma and judgement that they may encounter at the pharmacy.

### Cost

- EC sold through vending machines often costs less than in pharmacies.
- On campuses that install their own vending machines (rather than using an outside company), the price for EC is usually far less (\$11-\$20).
- Many campus vending machines accept credit cards and campus cards.

## The Bottom Line:

EC is a safe, effective way to prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex or sexual assault. Parents can play a supportive role in helping young people get EC when they need it. Contact the American Society for Emergency Contraception ([kelly@americansocietyforec.org](mailto:kelly@americansocietyforec.org)) for more information about EC.