

Many college students can't track down credible emergency contraception information online

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They seem to live their personal lives online, but when there is a glitch in the sex lives of college students, and emergency contraception is needed, many struggle to navigate the Web and find the information they need, according to a Northwestern University study.

The study was recently published online in the journal *Policy & Internet*.

The majority of the 210 first-year [college students](#) who participated in the study were unable to use websites and Internet search engines to identify the most efficient way to acquire emergency contraception pills (ECPs) in a time of need, said Eszter Hargittai, lead author of the study and associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern.

"These results suggest that despite their highly wired lifestyles, many young adults do not have the necessary skills to navigate the vast amounts of information available online with expertise," Hargittai said. "We shouldn't assume that every college student who walks into the classroom already has expert digital domain knowledge and web searching skills."

In fall 2007 and winter 2008, as part of a larger research project, study participants from both a suburban and an urban college in the Midwest, were asked to perform a dozen information-seeking tasks on a network-connected computer while being observed by a researcher.

In one task, on which data from this study are based, students were given the following hypothetical scenario about ECPs and asked to search out answers online:

"You are at home in the middle of summer. A friend calls you frantically on a Friday at midnight. The condom broke while she was with her boyfriend. What can she do to prevent pregnancy? Remember, neither of you is on campus. She lives in South Bend, Indiana."

The majority of the participants used a search engine (most often Google) to navigate to websites for information. Here are some of the websites they visited:

- 31 percent visited Planned Parenthood's national or local website
- 10 percent pulled up morningafterpill.org, a site by the American Life League
- 8 percent went to Princeton University's Office of Population Research website
- 6 percent visited Wikipedia during their search
- 4 percent looked at the Plan B emergency contraception pill manufacture's website
- 4 percent went to a topic-related site such as WebMD

Through their web searching methods, two-thirds of the students were able to conclude that their friend should seek an ECP, according to the study. But, fewer than half, 40 percent, were able to give the ideal response: that the friend should purchase ECPs over the counter at a pharmacy.

"Students who did not seem to have prior knowledge of emergency [contraception](#) often used a variant of the search term 'prevent pregnancy' and did not do a very good job at locating information about [emergency](#)

[contraception](#)," Hargittai said. "Those who already knew the answer or had some knowledge came up with the search terms 'the morning after pill' or the drug 'Plan B' and did a better job of finding information."

When looking through search engine results to assess site credibility, many students relied heavily on domain names ending with dot-org, which are not sanctioned any more than are dot-com sites, Hargittai said.

Some answers, each one provided by different respondents, included: "wait it out," "wash genitals," "adoption," "RU-486," "ascorbic acid," visiting a gynecologist in the incorrect locale, taking a pregnancy test, and purchasing another condom. Three percent of the students were unable to come to any conclusion on the question.

The researchers purposely placed the hypothetical situation in South Bend, Indiana, because that city doesn't have a Planned Parenthood clinic. They also made the time of day midnight to make it more difficult to obtain immediate information in any way other than online, Hargittai said.

The study was conducted within 14 months after the Federal Drug Administration's ruling that allowed ECPs to be available for purchase at pharmacies, without a prescription. From 1999 until January 1, 2007, ECP use required a prescription from a doctor. The research shows that important changes to health-related regulations might not propagate quickly among young people, Hargittai said.

"Young adults are much more likely than older adults to turn to the Internet as a resource when seeking health information," she said. "We need to incorporate into college curricula certain aspects of digital media usage, such as efficient searching and also credibility assessment of sources that people consult, to help young adults navigate the Internet with better expertise."

Provided by Northwestern University

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