

Emergency contraception: Types, side effects and more

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Confused about emergency contraception?

The experts have you covered. Here's a breakdown of what [emergency contraception](#) is, the different types that are available, the side effects you may experience, and how emergency contraception works. Plus, you'll find out where you can get emergency contraception.

What is emergency contraception?

Emergency contraception is a way to prevent pregnancy after [unprotected sexual intercourse](#), according to the [American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists](#) (ACOG). It must be used before a pregnancy occurs.

[Planned Parenthood](#) states that emergency contraception is not the [abortion pill](#), which is a way to end an early pregnancy.

"When used correctly, emergency contraception works well to prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex. It can be useful if birth control fails (like when a condom breaks or slips off), if birth control wasn't used during sex, or after sexual assault or rape. But there's a fairly short time in which to use it," Mount Sinai obstetrician-gynecologist [Dr. Cynthia Abraham](#) said in a recent [blog](#).

Types of emergency contraception

There are two main types of emergency contraception, according to the ACOG. These are IUDs (intrauterine devices) and emergency contraception pills.

IUDs

Copper IUDs are currently the only type of IUD used in emergency contraception. They must be inserted into your uterus by a health care

practitioner.

The other type of IUD, the levonorgestrel (hormonal) IUD, is used for long-term contraception only. However, a recent [study](#) of over 600 patients published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that both levonorgestrel IUDs and copper IUDs were equally effective forms of emergency contraception.

The study authors stated that [health care providers](#) only offer copper IUDs because more research is needed to establish the effectiveness of levonorgestrel IUDs for emergency use.

Emergency contraception pills

The emergency contraception pill, commonly known as "[the morning after pill](#)," is the second type of emergency contraception. [Planned Parenthood](#) states that this comes in two different forms.

Ulipristal acetate pills (brand name Ella) are considered the most effective of the two. However, they have been shown to be less effective for people who weigh 195 pounds or greater than for people under this weight.

Emergency contraception pills with levonorgestrel (a synthetic progestin) are the other type of emergency contraception [pill](#). They include:

- Plan B One-Step
- My Way
- Take Action
- Preveneza
- My Choice
- AfterPill
- Aftera

- EContra
- Option 2

How does emergency contraception work?

According to ACOG, copper IUDs work by limiting sperm's ability to fertilize eggs. They must be inserted within five days (120 hours) of unprotected sex, and they are considered the most effective form of emergency contraception. They can also be used as a long-term birth control method.

The medications found in emergency contraception pills work to alter [hormone levels](#) and delay [ovulation](#), which is the release of a mature egg from the ovary. This helps ensure sperm have no egg to fertilize.

Ulipristal pills must be taken within five days of unprotected sex.

Levonorgestrel pills are most effective when taken within three days of unprotected sex, although they have some level of effectiveness for up to five days.

Even though they are used for emergency contraception, ulipristal and levonorgestrel pills are not considered as effective as standard [birth control](#) for [long-term use](#). In addition, when comparing them to copper IUDs for emergency contraception, Abraham said, "Some research suggests that morning-after pills may be less effective if you are overweight or obese. Copper IUDs are not affected by your weight."

Emergency contraception side effects

The side effects of copper IUDs include menstrual pain and bleeding, especially within the first few months of the IUD being inserted.

Medication can be used to help treat these symptoms, which can last up to a year before they begin to ease, ACOG states.

The side effects of emergency contraception pills are considered short-term and mild. They include:

- Spotting and bleeding for up to a month after use
- A delayed or early next period
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea and vomiting
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Tender breasts

Where can you get emergency contraception?

Ulipristal [emergency contraception pills](#) "require a prescription," Abraham noted.

Levonorgestrel pills, on the other hand, are available over-the-counter. "Most pharmacies carry these pills. I suggest calling ahead to be sure they are in stock," she noted.

If you choose a copper IUD for emergency contraception, "an ob-gyn can place this device in the uterus within five days after [unprotected sex](#)," Abraham said.

Still have questions? You can use Planned Parenthood's [online tool](#) to discover if emergency [contraception](#) is right for you.

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