

Japan trials over-the-counter 'morning-after' pill

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Japan began a pilot project on Tuesday selling over-the-counter

"morning-after" contraceptive pills, but campaigners criticized the scheme as far too small and called for all restrictions to be lifted.

Rights groups have long complained that the emergency contraceptive was only available in socially conservative Japan with a doctor's prescription and a trip to a clinic or pharmacy.

This put many women off, particularly rape victims and teenage girls, according to campaigners.

Under the pilot project, the pill, which can prevent pregnancy within 72 hours of sex but becomes less effective with time, was set to be available at 145 pharmacies.

However, women still have to show ID and take the medication in front of a pharmacist, according to the website of the Japan Pharmaceutical Association.

The minimum age for over-the-counter purchase is 16 years old, though those under 18 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

The price was set between 7,000-9,000 yen (\$47-61).

The Emergency Contraceptives at Pharmacies Project campaign group said the trial was not enough.

"The selection of pharmacies was very strict. The pill is available only at 145 drugstores, or 0.2 percent of the total of 60,000 in Japan," the organization's co-chair Asuka Someya told reporters.

Someya also said that the parental consent requirement sets high hurdles for minors.

"There are many who say they cannot talk to their parents about possible pregnancy. It's going to be difficult if they have to talk about their [sexual experiences](#) and concern about pregnancy," she said.

"We have again requested the [health ministry](#) to make the pill available fully and rapidly at pharmacies" without restrictions, Someya said.

The [pilot project](#) follows an overwhelmingly positive reaction to a health ministry public consultation this year, with 97 percent of the 46,000 respondents in favor.

The World Health Organization says on its website that emergency contraception "should be routinely included within all national family planning programs".

More than 90 other countries allow the morning-after pill without a prescription, according to campaigners.

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