

FACTSHEET: Emergency Contraception (Morning After Pill)



What is emergency contraception?

Emergency contraception is used after unprotected sexual intercourse (UPSI) or when contraception may have not worked properly. Emergency contraception is used to reduce the risk of an unintended pregnancy. This might include if you didn't use contraception, forgot to take your contraceptive, the condom broke during sex or a number of other reasons.

UPSI can present a problem for 2 reasons:

1. Unplanned pregnancy and/ or,
2. Exposure to a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI).

So, if an UPSI happens and you prefer to avoid pregnancy, you should consider emergency contraception. You should get advice from a doctor about whether you need treatment for an STI.

Emergency Contraception

People commonly refer to emergency contraception as the "Morning After Pill" (MAP). However, the Emergency Contraceptive Pill can be taken later than the morning after an incident has occurred. Depending on the type of emergency contraception used, it can be used up to 3-5 days after UPSI, however the sooner it is administered the more effective it is.

The non-hormonal IUD (copper IUD) is the most effective emergency contraception. In addition to preventing unplanned pregnancy after UPSI, it will provide ongoing reliable contraception for at least 5 years.

Emergency Contraceptive Pills

In Australia, there are two types of Morning After Pill.

1. Levonorgestrel Emergency Contraceptive Pill (LNG pill) can be bought over-the-counter at a pharmacy without seeing a doctor. It needs to be taken within 3 days of the episode of unprotected sex (72 hrs) and is approximately 85% effective.
2. Upristal Acetate Emergency Contraceptive Pill (UPA pill) can also be bought over-the-counter at a pharmacy and without seeing a doctor. It needs to be taken within 5 days of the episode of unprotected sex (120 hrs). It is about 95% effective.

How does the Morning After Pill Work

Evidence has shown that emergency contraceptive pills work by stopping or delaying ovulation (the release of an egg from a woman's ovaries). The MAP may also prevent the egg and sperm from meeting. Emergency contraceptive pills do not prevent implantation of a fertilised egg and do not cause an abortion. If LNG or UPA pill is accidentally taken during pregnancy, they do not cause harm to the developing embryo or fetus.

Does the Morning After Pill have any side effects?

LNG and UPA are very safe with no serious or long-lasting side-effects. There is a small chance of nausea, breast tenderness or headache. MAP may cause some unpredictable bleeding, and your next period may be earlier or later than you expect.

Who can take the Morning After Pill?

Almost all women can take one of the Emergency Contraceptive Pill, but it is important for the pharmacist or doctor to know if they have any allergies or serious medical conditions. If women are breastfeeding and take UPA for Emergency Contraception, they should express and discard breastmilk for one week after taking the Morning After Pill as it can be detected in breast milk for up to 5 days.

Ongoing contraception

Emergency Contraceptives do not provide ongoing contraception. It is important to maintain your normal contraception plan such as the oral contraceptive pills. Otherwise, the woman could still become pregnant.

It is not recommended to take a progestogen-containing method of contraception within 5 days of UPA as it appears to reduce the effectiveness of the UPA. This includes the combined pill, vaginal ring, progestogen-only pill, implant, and depot injection.

Talk to a doctor or pharmacist about starting or restarting hormonal contraception after taking UPA. With LNG, it is possible to continue or start a hormonal method of contraception immediately after taking it.

Follow up

While most women do not need follow-up after taking an emergency contraceptive pill, they should talk to their doctor if:

- their period is more than a week late,
- their period is light or unusual in any way,
- they have any other concerns,
- they wish to discuss your ongoing contraception needs.

They may need to do a pregnancy test.

Emergency Contraception non-hormonal (copper) IUD

A copper IUD is more than 99% effective at preventing pregnancy and needs to be inserted within five days of the incident of UPSI by a trained health professional. It can be inserted as an awake procedure or under sedation here at Clinic 66.

The benefit of using the copper IUD is the ongoing reliability of contraception it provides, lasting for 5-10 years (depending on which device is used). It can also be removed at any time if you no longer wish to use it or if you are attempting to get pregnant.

If a copper IUD is being used for long lasting contraception, it may make periods heavier or longer a user is prone to that. However, even for women with heavy periods the copper IUD is an excellent form of emergency contraception.

No contraceptive is 100% reliable, but all intrauterine devices are more than 99% reliable. It doesn't get better than that!

For more information about the copper IUD, please see our Non-Hormonal IUD FAQ Factsheet.

UPSI and STI risk

Condoms are an effective form of contraception, but do not provide complete protection against STI's or pregnancy. However, they are the best protection against STIs that we have! If a condom breaks or comes off, or if there is a sexual assault, then you can discuss your risk of exposure to an STI with your doctor and together you can discuss any additional investigations or treatment that may be required.

With all types of Emergency Contraception, the sooner the better. None are 100% effective. So, if you have had unprotected sexual intercourse, you can call us today to make an appointment with one of our doctors to discuss any concerns and treatments.

More Information

If you have follow-up questions or a specific query that the information on this page did not cover, we encourage you to contact us. We can be reached via phone on 02 9411 3411 or via email at info@clinic66.com.au. Or, you can book an appointment at our Chatswood clinic between 8 am to 5.30 pm Monday to Friday, and 8 am to 4 pm Saturday.