

The morning after pill (emergency contraception)

The morning after pill is a single tablet that can be taken up to 3 days (72 hours) after unprotected sex to prevent pregnancy. It contains a hormone called levonorgestrel, the same hormone that is used in some versions of the mini-Pill. The earlier the pill is taken - the more likely it is to work.

The effectiveness of the morning after pill will depend on how many hours have passed since the contraceptive mishap.

- Within 24 hrs - 95%
- Between 25-48 hrs - 85%
- Between 49-72 hrs - 58%

How does it work?

It's still not fully understood how the morning after pill works because it depends on where you are in your cycle. For example:

- It may stop an egg being released from the ovary (ovulation)
- It may prevent sperm from fertilising any egg that may already have been released
- It may stop a fertilised egg from attaching itself to the lining of the womb

The morning after pill stops a pregnancy before it is established. It doesn't work if you are already pregnant.

The morning after pill is not meant to be used as a regular method of contraception. If you're sexually active, whether you have sex occasionally or frequently, you need to choose a regular long-term method of contraception that suits you.

Where can you get the morning after pill?

Women over the age of 16 can buy the morning after pill over the counter at most pharmacies. The pharmacist will generally ask a series of questions to make sure it's suitable.

Girls under the age of 16 cannot buy the morning after pill at the pharmacy and need to see a doctor or go to a family planning clinic or Walk-In Centre.

Side effects

The great majority of women can take the morning after pill without any problem. There are few side effects and there is no evidence of any long-term impact on health or future fertility.

However, a few medications can interact with the morning after pill, and make it less effective. And there are some medical conditions that may mean the morning after pill is not suitable for use.

The morning after pill should NOT be taken in the following circumstances:

- You have had an allergic reaction to the progestogen 'levonorgestrel' contained in some oral contraceptives
- You have a disease of the bowel/gut which causes malabsorption such as Crohn's disease
- You have severe liver disease
- You are taking medication that might interact with the morning after pill

If you are taking any other medication, you are ill or you have a long-term medical condition, be sure to tell your pharmacist, doctor or family planning clinic before taking the morning after pill and ask for advice on what to do next.

Are there any alternatives?

The alternative to the morning after pill is the IUD (intrauterine device). The IUD can be fitted as an alternative to the morning after pill up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sex.

The IUD is a small T-shaped frame with a thin copper coil around the stem which is inserted into the neck of the womb. It has to be fitted by a trained healthcare professional. It is normally used as a method of long-term birth control but can also be used to prevent pregnancy in an emergency.

If you're worried about an unplanned pregnancy, and it's more than 72 hours since you had unprotected sex, see your doctor or family planning clinic as soon as possible.

IUD Side effects

You may have some menstrual pain and some light bleeding for a few days after the fitting and if so, you can take painkillers until the pain passes.

IUD effectiveness

The IUD is the most effective method of emergency contraception - almost 100%.

Disclaimer: This article is for general information only and is not intended to replace a consultation with a healthcare professional, nor is it intended to provide specific medical advice and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

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