

# your guide to emergency contraception

Helping you choose the method  
of contraception that's best for you



# Emergency contraception

If you've had sex without using contraception (unprotected sex) or think your contraception might have failed, emergency contraception can reduce your risk of getting pregnant.

There are different types of emergency contraception:

- The emergency intrauterine device (IUD).
- An emergency contraceptive pill with the active ingredient ulipristal acetate (UPA). ellaOne is currently the only brand available in the UK.
- An emergency contraceptive pill with the hormone levonorgestrel. There are different brands.

Emergency contraception can be very effective, but it's not as effective as using other methods of contraception regularly.

The emergency IUD is the most effective emergency contraception because it can stop an egg being fertilised or stop a fertilised egg implanting in the uterus (womb).

An emergency contraceptive pill works by delaying ovulation (release of an egg), so it needs to be taken as soon as possible after sex to have the best chance of working. It won't work if you've already ovulated. Some people will get pregnant even when they take emergency pills correctly.

You don't need to use emergency contraception for the first 21 days after giving birth. For more information about contraception after giving birth, see FPA's leaflet *Contraceptive Choices – After You've Had Your Baby* at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

## Does emergency contraception cause an abortion?

No. Emergency contraception prevents pregnancy. It may stop ovulation (releasing an egg), stop an egg being fertilised, or stop a fertilised egg from implanting in the uterus (womb). Abortion ends a pregnancy and can only take place after a fertilised egg has implanted in the uterus.

## Where can I get emergency contraception?

You can get emergency contraception **free** from these places, but they may not all fit the IUD, which is the most effective kind of emergency contraception.

- A contraception or sexual health clinic.
- Any GP surgery that provides contraceptive services.
- A young people's service or Brook clinic (these will have an upper age limit).

You can also get emergency pills **free** from these places:

- Online sexual health services in some areas of the UK. They can send emergency pills by post and may offer a click and collect service. You usually need to be 16 or over.
- Some pharmacies. This depends on where you live and may only be available for certain age groups.
- Some genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics.
- Most NHS walk-in centres (in England only).
- Most NHS minor injuries units.
- Some hospital accident and emergency departments (phone first to check).

You can **buy** both types of emergency pill from:

- Most pharmacies, in person or online. You'll need to be 16 or over to buy levonorgestrel pills in person. You may need to be 18 or over to buy emergency pills online.
- Some fee-paying clinics.

## How do I buy emergency contraceptive pills from a pharmacist?

You can buy both types of emergency pill from most pharmacies. It will cost around £10-£35. You'll be asked some questions to check if the pill is right for you. Your answers are confidential. The pharmacist may not be able to sell it to you, for example if:

- it's been more than 3–5 days (72-120) hours since you had unprotected sex (depending on the type of pill)
- you think you might already be pregnant
- you're taking certain prescribed or complementary medicines
- you have certain health conditions.

In these circumstances you'll need to see a doctor or nurse.

All advice and treatment is confidential, wherever you receive it.

## How will I know if my emergency contraception has worked?

Do a pregnancy test to make sure you're not pregnant if:

- you think you may be pregnant or have any early signs of pregnancy, such as breast tenderness, feeling very tired, feeling sick, or peeing more often.

- you haven't had a normal period within 3 weeks of taking an emergency contraceptive pill or having the emergency IUD fitted
- you started a method of hormonal contraception soon after using emergency contraception; do a test even if you have a bleed.

A pregnancy test will be accurate if the test is done 3 weeks after the last time you had unprotected sex.

## Am I protected from future pregnancy?

You can continue to use the IUD as your regular contraceptive method if you want to. It will be highly effective at preventing pregnancy.

The emergency contraceptive pill **won't** continue to protect you from pregnancy. If you have unprotected sex again, you're at risk of pregnancy. Seek advice – you may need emergency contraception again.

## Can I take the emergency pill more than once in a menstrual cycle?

You can take the same type of emergency pill more than once in any menstrual cycle if you need to, but it may not be possible to take a different type of pill in the same cycle.

Emergency contraceptive pills aren't as effective as using other methods of contraception regularly.

It's important to start an effective method of contraception after using the emergency contraceptive pill. Ask the doctor, nurse or pharmacist for advice on effective methods, see FPA's leaflet *Your Guide to Contraception* at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk) or visit [www.sexwise.org.uk](http://www.sexwise.org.uk)

## How do I find out about contraception services?

The Sexual Health Helpline provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is **0300 123 7123**. It's open Monday to Friday from 9am-8pm and at weekends from 11am-4pm.

For more information on sexual health visit [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk) or [www.sexwise.org.uk](http://www.sexwise.org.uk)

Information for young people can be found at [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

You can find details of sexual health clinics and services and details of GP surgeries and pharmacies on these websites:

- England, [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)
- Wales, [111.wales.nhs.uk](http://111.wales.nhs.uk)
- Scotland, [www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)
- Northern Ireland, [www.sexualhealthni.info](http://www.sexualhealthni.info) and [online.hscni.net](http://online.hscni.net)

## Sexually transmitted infections

Most methods of contraception don't protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Condoms and internal condoms (also known as female condoms), used correctly and consistently, can help protect against STIs. If you can, avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called nonoxinol-9, which may increase the risk of HIV and other infections.

## What is it?

### Emergency IUD

A small plastic and copper device that's fitted in your uterus (womb) up to 5 days (120 hours) after unprotected sex or within 5 days of the earliest time you could've released an egg.

Your appointment will last around 20–30 minutes. Inserting the IUD usually takes around 5 minutes. It can be uncomfortable or painful for some people, and you may be offered a local anaesthetic. See FPA's leaflet *Your Guide to the IUD*.

The IUD is the most effective method of emergency contraception. If it can't be fitted immediately you may be advised to take an emergency contraceptive pill in the meantime.

### Emergency contraceptive pill with ulipristal acetate (UPA)

A tablet which contains the active ingredient ulipristal acetate (UPA). It can be more effective at preventing pregnancy than a pill with levonorgestrel.

You'll be given 1 pill to take. It should be taken within 5 days (120 hours) of having unprotected sex, but try and take it as soon as possible.

### Emergency contraceptive pill with levonorgestrel

A tablet which contains a hormone called levonorgestrel. This is a type of progestogen hormone, similar to the natural progesterone produced by the ovaries.

You'll be given 1 pill to take. It should be taken within 3 days (72 hours) of having unprotected sex but try and take it as soon as possible.

Ask your doctor for advice about taking it within 4 days (96 hours) of having unprotected sex.

## Who can use it?

Most people can use an emergency IUD, including young people and people who've never been pregnant.

It's not normally recommended before 28 days after giving birth. If you need to, you can use an emergency pill from 21 days after giving birth.

You can use an emergency IUD from day 5 after a miscarriage or abortion if there were no complications. If you had complications, ask a doctor or nurse for advice.

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Most people can use pills with UPA. If you have severe asthma or take certain prescribed medicines or complementary medicines, an emergency IUD may be a preferred option.

If you used hormonal contraception in the week before you use UPA, UPA might be less effective.

UPA can be used from day 21 after giving birth. Avoid breastfeeding for 1 week after taking it and express and discard your milk during this time.

You can use it from day 5 after a miscarriage or abortion.

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Most people can use pills with levonorgestrel. However, if you're taking certain prescribed medicines, complementary medicines, weigh more than 70kg, or have a BMI (body mass index) higher than 26, you'll need advice and the dose of levonorgestrel may need to be increased.

Levonorgestrel can be used from day 21 after giving birth.

You can use it from day 5 after a miscarriage or abortion.

## What are the disadvantages?

Some people may get a period-type pain and bleeding for a few days after the fitting. Painkillers can help.

There's a very small chance of getting an infection during the first 20 days after it's fitted. If you already have an infection you may be given antibiotics.

It's not common but the IUD can be pushed out of the uterus (womb) into the vagina or it can move inside the womb. There's a very small risk that it might perforate (go through) your womb when fitted. For more information, see FPA's leaflet Your Guide to the IUD at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

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There are no serious short- or long-term side effects.

- Some people may feel sick or may get headaches or a painful period.
- A very small number will vomit.
- It may alter your next period.

Most side effects go away within a few days.

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- A very small number will vomit.
- It may alter your next period.

Most side effects go away within a few days.

## How will it affect my next period?

Your next period should come at about the same time you'd normally expect it. It might be heavier than usual.

If you don't have a period within about a week of the expected time, do a pregnancy test.

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Your period may be on time, or a few days earlier or later than expected. Sometimes it can be a week late and sometimes even later.

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If you don't have a period within about a week of the expected time, do a pregnancy test.

## Do I need to see a doctor or nurse afterwards?

Yes. See a doctor or nurse 3–4 weeks after the IUD is fitted. This is to:

- check you're not pregnant
- discuss your future contraceptive needs
- remove the IUD if you don't want to keep it as your regular method.

The emergency IUD can be removed during your next period. If removed at any other time, you'll need to avoid sex or use additional contraception, such as condoms, for 7 days before it's taken out.

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See a doctor or nurse if:

- Your next period is more than 7 days late, is shorter or lighter than usual or you have any sudden or unusual pain in your lower abdomen. These could be signs of an ectopic pregnancy. Although this isn't common, it's very serious.
- You're worried you might have a sexually transmitted infection.

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## Can it fail?

About 1 in 1,000 women will become pregnant after having an emergency IUD fitted. If you can't feel the IUD threads at your cervix (neck of the womb, at the top of your vagina) or you can feel the IUD itself, you may not be protected from pregnancy. See your doctor or nurse straight away and use additional contraception.

The IUD is very effective but if it fails and you become pregnant, it's important to check that this isn't an ectopic pregnancy. If you have any unexpected bleeding or a sudden or unusual pain in your lower abdomen, seek advice as soon as possible.

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Some people get pregnant even though they took UPA correctly.

Because UPA delays ovulation, it won't work if you've already ovulated.

You may also become pregnant if you vomit within 3 hours of taking it or have further unprotected sex. Speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. They may give you another dose or suggest an emergency IUD. If you vomit later than 3 hours, UPA will have been absorbed.

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Some people get pregnant even though they took levonorgestrel correctly.

Because levonorgestrel delays ovulation, it won't work if you've already ovulated.

You may also become pregnant if you delay taking it, vomit within 3 hours of taking it or have further unprotected sex. Speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. They may give you another dose or suggest an emergency IUD.

If you vomit later than 3 hours, levonorgestrel will have been absorbed.

## When can I start regular contraception?

You can keep the IUD as your regular method of contraception if you want to. See FPA's leaflet Your Guide to the IUD at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

If you want to go back to using your usual contraception, speak to a doctor or nurse about having the IUD removed.

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If you're thinking about using emergency contraception because you've made a mistake with your usual hormonal contraception, get advice from a doctor, nurse or pharmacist about:

- whether emergency contraception is needed
- the best type of emergency pill to take
- when to restart your usual contraception.

If you weren't using any hormonal contraception before taking UPA, wait for 5 days before starting any regular hormonal contraception. Use condoms during the wait and until the new contraception is working.

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If you forgot your regular pill or didn't use the patch or vaginal ring correctly, then start your pill again, insert a new ring or apply a new patch as soon as possible after taking levonorgestrel.

If you weren't using any hormonal contraception before taking levonorgestrel, you can start most kinds straight away. Speak to a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

Use additional contraception, such as condoms:

- for 7 days with the patch, the ring and the combined pill (9 days for Qlaira)
- for 2 days with the progestogen-only pill (7 days for pills with a progestogen called drospirenone).

## A final word

This booklet can only give you general information. The information is based on evidence-guided research from the World Health Organization and The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

All methods of contraception come with a Patient Information Leaflet which provides detailed information about the method.

Contact your doctor, practice nurse or a sexual health clinic if you're worried or unsure about anything.

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the sexual health company



sexwise.org.uk

[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

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