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Guttmacher update

EMAIL UPDATE FROM THE GUTTMACHER INSTITUTE

Back Up Your Birth Control with Emergency Contraception

March 25, 2009, marks the eighth anniversary of the Back Up Your Birth Control Day of Action, a day devoted to increasing awareness of and access to emergency contraception, sometimes called Plan B or the "morning-after pill."

The typical American woman wants two children. To achieve this, she spends only a few years trying to become or being pregnant, but about three decades trying to avoid pregnancy. That effort poses a daunting challenge.

Recent Guttmacher [research](#) documents the difficulty women confront in using contraception consistently and correctly over a lifetime. Finding the "right" contraceptive method is not a one-time decision-rather, it is a series of choices in response to women's changing life circumstances and contraceptive needs.

The study found that life changes, such as the beginning or end of a relationship, a job loss or change, moving to a new home or a personal crisis, can [contribute to lapses in contraceptive use](#), increasing the risk of unprotected sex. That's why emergency contraception, a back-up birth control method, can play a key role in helping women ensure that a contraceptive lapse or failure does not lead to unintended pregnancy. Health care providers are especially well positioned to counsel women about the potential impact of life events on their contraceptive use. They can also help women prepare for those transitions, as well as for potential method failures (like condoms breaking during sex) by providing emergency contraception to keep at hand in case it is needed and by educating them about its benefits and availability.

Emergency contraception has been available over-the-counter without a prescription to [women and men aged 18 and older since August 2006](#). However, the Food and Drug Administration still requires women younger than 18 to obtain a prescription, a requirement that can cause delays in obtaining the method. Such delays increase a young woman's risk of an unintended pregnancy: While emergency contraception can help prevent unintended pregnancy when taken up to 120 hours after unprotected sex, it is most effective the sooner it is taken.

Continued efforts to raise public awareness about emergency contraception are essential and should include debunking myths about the method. Many women and men still do not know that emergency contraception exists or are confused about how the method works. Emergency contraception contains the same hormones found in ordinary birth control pills. It will not in any way disrupt an established pregnancy. And it is not to be confused with mifepristone, sometimes called RU-486, a drug used to terminate a pregnancy that is only available and administered at clinics or doctor's offices.

Much still remains to be done to help women and their partners improve their contraceptive use overall. The more we can identify and remove barriers to consistent use-while ensuring people know about and have access to a back-up method like emergency contraception-the better prepared women will be to avoid unintended pregnancies and plan for the children they want, when they want them.

Click here for more information on:

[Achieving greater contraceptive convenience](#)

[Improving Contraceptive Use](#)

[Facts on Contraceptive Use](#)

[State Policies on Emergency Contraception](#)

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