EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION (PLAN B®)

What is it?
The Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP, aka “morning after pill”) can be used by a woman to reduce the risk of pregnancy occurring after unprotected vaginal intercourse. ECP is branded in Canada as Plan B, Next Choice, Norolevo, and Option 2. ECP can be taken after unprotected intercourse, including a known or suspected birth control failure (e.g. broken condom, missed pills).
- ECP is most effective if taken as soon as possible after unprotected intercourse, ideally within 72 hours, but it may be effective up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected intercourse.
- All branded ECP in Canada contains a progestin hormone called levonorgestrel, which is also an ingredient in some birth control pills.
- Taking ECP is not the same as taking a large dose of birth control pills. It is also not the same as the abortion pill (RU486, Mifepristone).
- ECP does not work if you are already pregnant.
- ECP is for emergency/back up use only.
- ECP should not be relied on as a regular contraceptive method.

How does it work?
You must take ECP within 5 days of unprotected intercourse. ECP works by:
- delaying ovulation (the ovary’s release of an egg)
- preventing fertilization (sperm and egg meeting).

How effective is it?
Levonorgestrel ECP is effective at reducing the risk of pregnancy by up to 89%. ECP may not work if:
- an egg has already been fertilized
- too much time went by between unprotected intercourse and taking the pills
- unprotected intercourse occurs again after taking the pills, especially before your period comes (i.e. abstain or begin an effective contraceptive method immediately)
- your weight is 75 kg (165 lbs) or greater (see below).

How do I use Plan B® (ECP that Opt carries)?
- Take the two white pills together as soon as possible, within 5 days of unprotected intercourse. The sooner it is taken the more effective it is, with best results if taken within 72 hours.
- Plan B® causes less nausea than older ECP treatments that contained estrogen. If you do feel nauseous it will usually be mild and go away within a day. You can take an anti-nausea medication (e.g. Dimenhydrinate, or Gravol®). If you do vomit, a replacement dose of Plan B® is not necessary unless it has been less than one hour since you took the Plan B®.
- You may experience spotting after taking ECP.
- You should begin your period within 3 weeks of taking ECP. If you still haven’t had a period after 21 days, return to the clinic for a pregnancy test.

ECP & body weight
Health Canada advises that levonorgestrel emergency contraceptive pills (Plan B, Next Choice, Norlevo, Option 2) are not as effective for women weighing 75 kg (165 lbs) and greater and are not effective for women over 80 kg (176 lb).
- a copper IUD is very effective (99%) for emergency contraception, regardless of a person’s weight, and can be inserted up to 7 days after unprotected intercourse - but ideally as soon as possible
Plan B is still recommended, regardless of your weight, in case you cannot get an IUD inserted for any reason (e.g. cost, access to a provider).

Who should not use ECP?
It is important to talk to your health care provider before taking ECP if any of the following apply to you:
- pregnancy - ECP will not be effective If you are already pregnant
- allergy to any component of the drug
- unusual vaginal bleeding that has not been diagnose

Can ECP harm a fetus?
There is no evidence that ECP will harm a pregnant woman or the developing fetus if the product is taken during early pregnancy.

Are there side effects?
ECP may cause minor side effects, such as:
- Nausea
- Abdominal pain
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Breast tenderness
- Menstrual changes – e.g. your period may come a few days earlier or later than expected.

Can I get ECP in British Columbia without a prescription?
Levonorgestrel ECP is available without prescription from Options for Sexual Health clinics, and pharmacies. Keep in mind:
- If you have purchased ECP in advance of need, be sure to check the expiry date before you use it.
- ECP does not provide protection from sexually transmitted infections or HIV.
- If the unprotected intercourse was not consensual (sexual assault), support is available.
- ECP will not protect you from pregnancy if you have unprotected intercourse after you take it.
- You can start to use a reliable, on-going method of birth control right after taking ECP. Ask a health care provider at any Opt clinic to discuss birth control options with you.
- ECP will not work if you are already pregnant.
- A pregnancy test is advised if you do not get your period by 21 days after taking ECP.

Where else can I get ECP?
Youth clinics, some family doctor offices, some Walk-In Clinics, Pharmacies and Hospital emergency departments

Options for Sexual Health (Opt) has someone available to answer questions about ECP during clinic hours or you can call the SEX SENSE Line at 1-800-SEX-SENSE (739-7367) or 604-731-7803 in the Lower Mainland.
If you need emergency contraception and the clinic is not open:
- go to your local pharmacy
- call 1-888-NOT-2-LATE