

Fact Sheet

Q&A: ABORTION AND EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION

ABORTION
LAW
REFORM
ASSOCIATION
NEW ZEALAND

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Question

If I use the emergency contraception pill (“morning after” pill) will it cause me to have an abortion?

Answer

No. Emergency contraception prevents pregnancy. If a woman is already pregnant, emergency contraception will have no effect on the pregnancy and will not cause an abortion.

Facts

Emergency contraception is birth control that prevents pregnancy up to five days after unprotected sex. The primary and very likely only mechanism of action is that emergency contraception (EC) stops or disrupts ovulation (Reznik 2010, UNDP et al. 2010, FIGO and ICEC 2008). This means that no mature egg is released from the ovary. If a mature egg is not released, then it cannot be fertilized and a woman cannot become pregnant. This is similar to the way in which regular hormonal contraceptives work. EC use does not prevent a fertilized egg from attaching to the uterine lining.

The most widely available form of emergency contraception is levonorgestrel-alone Emergency Contraceptive Pills (LNG-ECPs), sometimes called “the morning after pill”. They are available in New Zealand in one pill under the brand names Postinor-1 or Levonelle-1. This is the regimen recommended by the World Health Organization and available in most countries. Research shows that making ECPs more widely available does not adversely affect regular contraceptive use or increase risk-taking, such as having unprotected sex (Polis et al. 2010).

Background

Safety of LNG-ECPs: Levonorgestrel, the active ingredient in LNG-ECPs, has been widely used in various formulations for more than thirty years and has been extensively studied in women of reproductive age. LNG-ECPs have been found to be safe. Side effects from using LNG-ECPs are uncommon and generally mild (UNDP et al. 2010, FIGO and ICEC 2008). LNG-ECPs cannot harm a pregnant woman or a developing fetus if they are taken early in pregnancy (WHO 2005). A study that compared pregnancy outcomes in women who used LNG-ECPs during their conception cycle with women who had not used LNG-ECPs found no differences in rates of miscarriage, birth weight, malformations or in the sex ratio at birth (Zhang et al. 2009).

Continued Next Page

LNG-ECPs are safe for use by all women, including adolescents (UNDP et al. 2010, FIGO and ICEC 2008). Research shows that the use of hormonal contraception, including ECPs, have no adverse effect on future fertility and that LNG-ECPs do not interrupt an established pregnancy or harm a developing embryo (Liskin and Rutledge 1984).

Most brands of oral contraceptives (OCs) can be used as post-coital contraception. The website, www.not-2-late.com has instructions, including brand names of OCs and how many pills need to be taken for them to serve as effective post-coital emergency contraception. It is important to have accurate information since the hormonal dosage varies by brand.

In New Zealand, EC is available from Family Planning, your doctor, accident and medical centres, sexual health clinics and pharmacies.

For More Information:

Family Planning: www.familyplanning.org.nz/ and click on Need Help Now?