

# Your Emergency Contraception questions answered



British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) is the UK's leading abortion care service. Emergency contraception is a safe and effective means to prevent pregnancy when something has gone wrong with your usual method of contraception, or you have had unprotected sex. You will need to act quickly.

## There are two kinds of emergency contraception:

- Emergency contraceptive pill or 'morning after pill' and
- Copper intra-uterine device 'IUD' (coil).

## Emergency contraceptive pills (ECP, 'Morning-after pill')

There are two types of morning after pill: Levonelle® and ellaOne®. Levonelle can be taken up to 72 hours (3 days) after unprotected sex. ellaOne can be used up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sex.

Regular family planning methods are more effective than emergency contraceptive pills. You can buy emergency contraceptive pills (ECP) in advance online and from pharmacies.

## How does it work?

It prevents or delays the release of an egg from the ovary (ovulation). It may also affect the lining of the womb so a fertilised egg can't settle.

## How effective is it?

The sooner Levonelle is taken after unprotected sex, the more likely it will work. If taken within 24 hours of unprotected sex, Levonelle will prevent up to 95% of pregnancies expected to have occurred if emergency contraception had not been used. If taken between 25 to 48 hours after sex, it will prevent up to 85% of pregnancies and between 49 to 72 hours after sex, it will prevent up to 58% of pregnancies that would have been expected to occur.

ellaOne is believed to be more effective than Levonelle and works as well regardless of when it is taken after unprotected sex (up to 120 hours). Both types of morning after pill can fail.

## When is it more likely to fail?

- Levonelle is more likely to fail the longer you wait to take it after unprotected sex.
- If you vomit within two hours of taking the pill. Speak to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist if this happens.
- If you've had unprotected sex at any other time since your last period or since taking the emergency contraceptive pill.

## Does the emergency contraceptive pill give me ongoing protection against pregnancy?

No. If you've had unprotected sex again, you may need emergency contraception again - seek some advice. Emergency contraception isn't reliable as a regular method of contraception.



## Are there any side effects?

Yes, there can be side effects, such as:

- nausea and vomiting
- dizziness or tiredness
- headaches
- breast tenderness.

## Can anyone use the emergency contraceptive pill?

Most women can, even those who cannot use the combined contraceptive pills or contraceptive patch. Breastfeeding women can use the emergency contraceptive pill. Certain medicines (both prescribed and complementary) can affect the emergency contraceptive pill and in this case, you should seek advice.

## Breastfeeding

It is safe to take Levonelle whilst breastfeeding. Small amounts of the hormones in Levonelle may pass into your breast milk, but its thought not to be harmful.

It isn't yet known if it is safe to take ellaOne during breastfeeding. The manufacturer recommends that you stop breastfeeding for one week after taking the pill.

## What else should I know about the emergency contraceptive pill?

- Your next period may arrive at the expected time or be a little early or late; for some women, their next period can be late by a week or more.
- You may get some spotting or heavier bleeding up to the time your period arrives.
- If the emergency contraceptive pill fails to prevent pregnancy, there is no evidence that the foetus will be damaged by the pill.
- Emergency contraception is not intended to be used regularly but should be used as a back-up to other methods of contraception.
- The emergency contraceptive pill poses little risk to women's health.
- There is no limit to how many times you can use Levonelle. It is recommended that ellaOne is taken only once during a cycle.
- There is no age limit for smokers.

## How will I know if it has worked?

If your next period seems like a normal period, it is unlikely that you are pregnant. However, you should do a pregnancy test if:

- you feel pregnant
- your period has not arrived within 3 weeks of taking the emergency contraceptive pill
- you do not have a bleed at the expected time, if you are taking hormonal contraception (like the pill).

If you do a pregnancy test from 3 weeks after the last time you had unprotected sex, the test should be reliable.

## Where can I get the emergency contraceptive pill?

From pharmacies, your GP, family planning clinics, NHS walk-in centres, some hospital accident and emergency departments and BPAS.

## Can I get the emergency contraceptive pill in advance?

BPAS has always encouraged women to keep the emergency contraceptive pill at home, just in case. You can buy emergency contraceptive pills (ECP) in advance from pharmacies and online pharmacies.

**BPAS - here if you need us**

**03457 30 40 30** (or +44 1789 508 211)

[www.bpas.org](http://www.bpas.org)

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# Copper IUD ('the coil')

The IUD (coil) is a small plastic and copper T-shaped device that is placed inside the uterus (womb) by a doctor or a nurse. It is the most effective form of emergency contraception.

It can be used up to 120 hours after the first episode of unprotected sex, or within five days of the earliest expected date of ovulation. It can then be kept in place as a regular contraceptive method.

## How does it work?

It works by preventing an egg being fertilised or implanted in the womb.

## How effective is it?

It is over 99% effective as a method of contraception and as a method of emergency contraception, it can prevent over 99% of pregnancies that would otherwise have been expected to occur. It is the most effective form of emergency contraception and can be left in place to provide ongoing birth control for up to 10 years.

## When can it be fitted?

Up to 5 days after unprotected sex or up to 5 days after the date of expected ovulation (release of an egg from the ovary).

## Are there any side effects?

Some women experience cramping pains and/or light bleeding for 3 to 4 days following fitting. Painkillers taken before fitting and in the following days can help to ease this.

## Who is it not suitable for?

- Women who are allergic to copper.
- Women with fibroids in the womb where it is not possible to place the IUD.

## Breastfeeding

It is safe to have an IUD fitted whilst you are breastfeeding.

## Can there sometimes be problems with the IUD?

- Sometimes the womb can expel, or push out, the IUD.
- Sometimes an IUD can be pushed through the womb when it is fitted, causing a perforation.
- There is a very small chance of pelvic infection in the first 20 days following IUD fitting.

## Where can I get a Copper IUD?

The Copper IUD is available from family planning clinics and some GPs. BPAS does not provide copper coils as an emergency contraception option.

Emergency contraception doesn't protect you against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). If you are worried about STIs, you can go to a genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinic, a family planning clinic or your GP for testing.

## Advantages

It is the most effective method of emergency contraception and if the woman and her doctor agree it is the right method for her it can be used as an ongoing method of contraception.

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