



Emergency Contraception



Position Statement

SHQ (Sexual Health Quarters) supports improved availability of and access to emergency contraception across Australia

Position Points

- ▶ Emergency contraception is an essential part of sexual and reproductive healthcare
- ▶ All people have the right to access safe and effective contraception, which includes timely access to emergency contraception
- ▶ SHQ supports improved availability of and access to all types of emergency contraception, in particular the most effective method, the copper intrauterine device (IUD)
- ▶ Prompt and easy access to emergency contraception is crucial to its efficacy

What is Emergency Contraception?

Emergency contraception is any contraceptive method that can be used to reduce the risk of pregnancy following sex. It can be used in situations such as contraceptive failure, when no contraception has been used, or sexual assault. There are three methods used in Australia: the copper intrauterine device (IUD); the emergency contraceptive pill (ECP) containing the hormone levonorgestrel (LNG); and the emergency contraceptive pill containing ulipristal acetate (UPA).

The main mechanism of action of copper IUDs is inhibition of fertilisation as the copper ions released from the device have a toxic effect on sperm, which affects their mobility and viability, and on ova. In rare cases where fertilisation does occur, implantation is prevented because of the inflammatory response in the endometrium¹.

ECPs do not cause an abortion. They work by preventing or delaying ovulation (release of an egg from the ovaries), so that no fertilisation takes place. ECPs are no longer effective if ovulation or fertilisation have already occurred, and will not harm an established pregnancy^{2,3}.

As emergency contraception does not provide any protection against sexually transmissible infections (STIs), nor is it as effective at preventing pregnancy as other contraceptive methods (such as long-acting reversible contraception), it is not suitable for regular use. However, repeated use poses no known health risks^{2,3}. SHQ encourages people who have had unprotected sex to get tested for STIs.

Efficacy

The copper IUD is the most effective form of emergency contraception, however services available for IUD insertion within the short time frame (120 hours after unprotected sex) in Australia are limited¹. SHQ advocates for increasing access to the copper IUD in Australia as a form of emergency contraception, which includes clinical training of more health professionals in IUD insertion.

¹These devices are not subsidised under the PBS and as a one-off cost are more expensive than ECPs, but can provide highly effective long-acting (up to 5 to 10 years) reversible contraception.

Access

The levonorgestrel ECP has been available in Australia since 2002, and since 2004 has been available over the counter at pharmacies⁴. The UPA pill has been available since 2016, and was rescheduled the following year to be available over the counter. Australian research shows broad support for availability of the ECP at pharmacies without a prescription⁵.

SHQ seeks to improve access to all types of emergency contraception by:

- ▶ Promoting awareness of all options available
- ▶ Offering education and training for health professionals incorporating information around emergency contraception

- ▶ Advocating for access to and affordability of all types of emergency contraception
- ▶ Supporting ongoing research around emergency contraception

There is no evidence supporting the concern that increased access to the ECP promotes unsafe practices^{6,7}. Studies show that individuals who can easily obtain the ECP have increased and earlier use^{8,9}, are not more likely to abandon other more effective contraceptive methods^{3,7,10,11} and are not more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour or use the ECP repeatedly^{7,10,12,13}.

Australian pharmacists follow guidelines provided by their professional body when supplying ECP over the counter, which includes offering general information about contraception or referral⁵. SHQ expects any pharmacist who decides not to stock the ECP for ethical or moral reasons, to refer clients to a pharmacy who does, supporting a person's decision to manage their own health and fertility.

SHQ recognises:

- ▶ Prompt and easy access to emergency contraception is crucial to its efficacy
- ▶ People should be informed of the availability of emergency contraception and its place among the full range of contraceptive methods
- ▶ People should receive accurate information about emergency contraception from health professionals

Use

Although the proportion of women in Australia who have ever used the ECP increased after rescheduling of the LNG and UPA pills¹⁴, use and understanding of emergency contraception still remains relatively low¹⁵. Research shows that people continue to have poor knowledge of the availability, safety and effects of ECPs and many are unaware that the ECP is available at pharmacies without prescription^{5,8,16,17}. Persistent misunderstandings also remain around how ECPs work, including the belief that are only effective the 'morning after' or within 24 hours of intercourse^{17,18} or that they cause abortion⁵.

Misinformation and lack of awareness are common barriers to ECP use in the event of unprotected sex⁸. As the effectiveness of the ECP is time-dependant, and its use has the potential to reduce the incidence of unintended pregnancy, it is of concern if it is being underused. Addressing knowledge and stigma around the ECP is fundamental to increasing use of this medically safe and effective strategy⁵. Healthcare professionals play an important role in addressing misperceptions and lack of awareness around emergency contraception³.

Conclusion

SHQ supports improved access to all types of emergency contraception across Australia, in particular the copper IUD as the most effective emergency contraceptive method. All people at risk of unintended pregnancy have the right to access emergency contraception. While SHQ supports the availability of ECPs over the counter, it acknowledges that some barriers to their use still remain. SHQ will work to improve awareness in the community and health professionals to help increase use of emergency contraception. SHQ will also continue to advocate for access to and affordability of emergency contraception, as well as support future research in this area.

References

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