Emergency Contraception for Adolescents

In the United States, half of all pregnancies are unintended and over one-third of women become pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20. Emergency Contraception Pills (ECP) are a safe and effective means to reduce unintended pregnancies and need to be accessible to women of all ages. If used within 120 hours of unprotected intercourse, ECP can prevent pregnancy. Increased availability of Plan B could reduce the number of unintended and/or terminated pregnancies that occur in this country each year. Three years after the approval of Plan B over the counter access for women 18 and older, in March of 2009, the FDA finally approved over the counter access for women 17 and older.

FAST FACTS

- Nearly four in ten young women become pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20 (nearly one million a year). Eight in ten of these pregnancies are unintended, and 79% are to unmarried teens.

- In 2000, use of ECP prevented more than 50,000 abortions in the US.

- In 2007, almost half of all high school students reported having had sexual intercourse at least once. Access to ECP for all women of reproductive age is the next logical step in teen pregnancy prevention and achieving lowered abortion rates.

- Emergency contraceptive pills work by delaying or inhibiting ovulation, inhibiting fertilization, or preventing implantation of a fertilized egg in the uterus. ECP prevent pregnancy – they do not interrupt, terminate, or harm an existing pregnancy.

- Proper use of ECP can reduce the risk of pregnancy up to 89%.

- There are two different types of ECP:
  - One type contains the hormones estrogen and progestin, and is referred to as the combination ECP or the Yuzpe regimen (in the US, this pill is known as Preven).
  - The other type, more commonly used in the United States, contains only progestin and is widely known as Plan B®.

- Although approved for prescription only by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1999, knowledge of and about ECP by adolescent health care providers and pharmacists, as well as by adolescents themselves is often inaccurate or lacking; thereby limiting patient access to and use of ECP. In fact, only about 6% of women of all ages have ever used emergency contraception.

- Besides overall awareness, there are other major ECP concerns:
  - Not all emergency rooms treating victims of sexual assault, dispense ECP, or even inform patients of it and refer them elsewhere to receive it.
  - Recently, some pharmacists are claiming “moral authority” by refusing to fill prescriptions for ECP, and may also be declining to refer a patient to a pharmacist who will fill a prescription.

- On March 23, 2009, a federal court issued an order directing the FDA, to permit the Plan B drug sponsor to make Plan B available to women 17 and older without a prescription. The FDA approved the over the counter status of Plan B® for consumers 17 years and older shortly after.

- Research has shown that advance provisioning of ECP and ease of access to ECP does not affect adolescents’ sexual behavior, nor increase their risk of STIs.
RESOURCES

Healthy Teen Network: www.healthyteennetwork.org
SIECUS: www.siecus.org
Community Action Kit: www.communityactionkit.org
Sex Ed Library: www.sexedlibrary.org
Advocates for Youth: www.advocatesforyouth.org
The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy: www.teenpregnancy.org
Reproductive Health Technologies Project: www.rhtp.org
Back up your Birth Control: www.backupyourbirthcontrol.org
Emergency Contraception: www.ec.princeton.edu
GO2EC: www.go2ec.org

REFERENCES

1 CDC, 2001.
10 CDC, 2006.