

## Emergency Contraception

Emergency contraception (EC) is a safe and effective way to prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex or when a primary method of birth control fails. Experts believe that with widespread use the number of unwanted pregnancies could be cut in half.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this form of contraception is not accessible to many women. Instead, obstacles exist that make EC unavailable, too burdensome, or too costly to obtain. Further, many restrictions to EC access are being pushed at the local, state, and federal levels by the extreme ideological views of a few. To deny access on the basis of one religious belief is to deny individuals the freedom to make personal decisions about their own health. All women, regardless of age, income, religion, race, or geographic location must have access to the full range of contraceptive options—including emergency contraception.

### EC is not an abortion drug.

Emergency contraception—commonly known by the brand name Plan B—works in exactly the same way as other hormonal birth control methods (e.g. oral contraceptives like the pill or the patch): by delaying or inhibiting ovulation, interfering with fertilization, or preventing implantation.<sup>2</sup> EC will not interrupt an already established pregnancy.

### EC is effective.

When taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex or birth control failure, EC reduces the risk of pregnancy by 89 percent.<sup>3</sup> Plan B is more effective when taken soon after unprotected sex or failure of a primary method of birth control. The drug's effectiveness is reduced exponentially when a woman delays taking Plan B by even a few hours.

### EC is safe.<sup>4</sup>

When used as directed, Plan B is safe for women—even young women—and has no serious or lasting medical side effects.

### EC is available over the counter for some women, but not all.

Since 1999, Plan B, the most common emergency contraceptive, has been available to women by prescription only. In August 2006, the FDA approved Plan B for sale to individuals 18 and older over the

counter. However, there is no evidence to indicate that there is an increased risk to women under the age of 18.

### Despite recent actions to increase access to EC, some barriers still exist.

For example,

- ▶ Not all pharmacies stock Plan B.
- ▶ The over-the-counter cost of Plan B ranges from \$30 to \$65.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Because the over-the-counter sale of Plan B is restricted to women 18 and older, it is stocked behind the pharmacy counter. This forces individuals wishing to purchase it to ask for it, providing pharmacists who are unwilling to dispense the medication with an opportunity to refuse to do so.

### EC must be offered in all emergency rooms.

Despite its demonstrated safety and efficacy, many emergency rooms do not, as standard procedure, provide information about, and access to Plan B emergency contraception for victims of sexual assault.

<sup>1</sup>Plan B Decision by FDA a Victory for Common Sense, New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2007.

<sup>2</sup>FDA's Decision Regarding Plan B: Questions and Answers, Maryland: US Food and Drug Administration, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Emergency Contraception Is *Just That*, Contraception: EC Reduces Abortion by Preventing Unintended Pregnancy, Washington, DC: National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association, 2006.

<sup>4</sup>The Emergency Contraception Website, Office of Population Research at Princeton University and Association for Reproductive Health Professionals, 2007.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.