

# your guide to emergency contraception

Helping you choose the method  
of contraception that is best for you



# Emergency contraception

If you have had unprotected sex, that is, sex without using contraception, or think your contraception might have failed, you can use emergency contraception. There are different types of emergency contraception:

- the emergency contraceptive pill, Levonelle
- the emergency contraceptive pill, ellaOne
- the emergency intrauterine device (IUD).

Emergency contraception can be very effective especially if you have an IUD fitted or if the emergency contraceptive pill is taken soon after sex.

You don't need to use emergency contraception for the first 21 days after giving birth.

## Does emergency contraception cause an abortion?

No. Emergency contraception may stop ovulation, fertilisation of an egg, or a fertilised egg from implanting in the uterus (womb). Medical research and legal judgement are quite clear that emergency contraception prevents pregnancy and is not abortion. Abortion can only take place after a fertilised egg has implanted in the uterus.

## Where can I get emergency contraception?

You can get emergency contraception free from these places, but they may not all supply ellaOne or fit the IUD.

- Any general practice that provides contraceptive services.
- A contraception clinic.
- Any young person's service or Brook clinic.
- Any sexual health clinic.
- Some genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics.

You can also get Levonelle free from:

- most NHS walk-in centres (in England only)
- most pharmacies (there may be age restrictions)
- most NHS minor injuries units
- some hospital accident and emergency departments (phone first to check).

You can buy Levonelle from:

- most pharmacies if you are 16 years old or over
- some fee-paying clinics.

You can buy ellaOne from:

- some pharmacies
- some fee-paying clinics.

Ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about getting emergency pills in advance, just in case you need them.

## How do I buy Levonelle from a pharmacist?

It will cost around £25. The pharmacist may not be able to sell it to you, for example if:

- it has been more than 72 hours since you had unprotected sex
- you have had unprotected sex more than once in the menstrual cycle
- you think that you might already be pregnant
- you are taking certain prescribed or complementary medicines
- you have certain health conditions.

In these circumstances you will need to see a doctor or nurse. All the advice and treatment you receive is confidential – wherever you receive it.

## How will I know if my emergency contraception has worked?

It is unlikely that you will be pregnant, but do a pregnancy test to make sure you are not pregnant if:

- you feel pregnant
- you have not had a normal period within three weeks of taking Levonelle, ellaOne or having the emergency IUD inserted
- you do not have a bleed when you have the seven day break from using the combined pill, contraceptive patch or the contraceptive vaginal ring, or when you take the placebo tablets with EveryDay combined pills.

A pregnancy test will be accurate if the test is done three weeks after the last time you had unprotected sex.

## Am I protected from future pregnancy?

Levonelle and ellaOne will not protect you from pregnancy if you have unprotected sex again. Seek advice – you can take Levonelle as many times as you need to in any menstrual cycle. ellaOne cannot be used more than once in the same menstrual cycle or in the same cycle as taking Levonelle. You can continue to use the IUD as your long-term contraceptive method.

Emergency contraception is not as effective as using other methods of contraception regularly – seek advice on using other methods.

## How do I find out about contraception services?

The Sexual Health Information Line provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is 0300 123 7123 and the service is available from Monday to Friday from 9am-8pm and at weekends from 11am-4pm.

For additional information on sexual health visit [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

Information for young people can be found at [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

## Clinics

To locate your closest clinic you can:

- Use Find a Clinic at [www.fpa.org.uk/clinics](http://www.fpa.org.uk/clinics)
- Download FPA's Find a Clinic app for iPhone or Android.

You can find details of general practices and pharmacies in England at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) and in Wales at [www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk). In Scotland you can find details of general practices at [www.nhs24.com](http://www.nhs24.com) and in Northern Ireland at [www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)

## Sexually transmitted infections

Most methods of contraception do not protect you from sexually transmitted infections.

Male and female condoms, when used correctly and consistently, can help protect against sexually transmitted infections. If you can, avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called Nonoxinol 9, which does not protect against HIV and may even increase the risk of infection.

## What is it?

### Emergency contraceptive pill – Levonelle

Levonelle is a tablet containing a hormone called progestogen.

You will be given one pill to take. It should be taken within three days (72 hours) of having unprotected sex.

Ask your doctor for advice about taking it within five days (120 hours) of having unprotected sex.

### Emergency contraceptive pill – ellaOne

ellaOne is a tablet which contains ulipristal acetate.

You will be given one pill to take within five days (120 hours) of having unprotected sex.

### Emergency IUD

An IUD is a small plastic and copper device that is fitted in your uterus up to five days (120 hours) after unprotected sex or within five days of the earliest time you could have released an egg. It takes about 15–20 minutes to fit. It can be uncomfortable – you can ask for a local anaesthetic.

If it cannot be fitted immediately you may be advised to take Levonelle or ellaOne.

## Who can use it?

Most women can use Levonelle. However, if you are taking certain prescribed medicines or complementary medicines, you will need advice and the dose of Levonelle may need to be increased. The emergency IUD may be preferred.

Levonelle can be used from day 21 after giving birth. You can use it after a miscarriage or abortion.

Most women can use ellaOne. If you have liver disease, severe asthma or take certain prescribed medicines or complementary medicines, an emergency IUD may be a preferred option.

Avoid breastfeeding for one week after taking ellaOne.

Most women can use an emergency IUD but it is not normally recommended before 28 days after giving birth. If you need to, you can use Levonelle or ellaOne until this time.

You may be able to use the emergency IUD after a miscarriage or abortion. Speak to a doctor or nurse. You may be offered antibiotics when you have the IUD fitted.

## What are the disadvantages?

There are no serious short or long-term side-effects.

- Some women may feel sick, dizzy or tired, or may get headaches, breast tenderness or abdominal pain.
- A very small number will vomit.
- It may alter your next period.

Most side-effects go away within a few days.

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Some women may get the same side-effects as for Levonelle above. They may also get:

- painful periods
- mood swings
- muscle and back pain.

Most side-effects go away within a few days.

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Some women may get a period-type pain and light bleeding for a few days after the IUD is fitted. Pain relief can help.

There is a very small chance of getting an infection during the first 20 days after it is fitted. If you already have an infection you may be given antibiotics.

It is not common but the IUD can be pushed out or it can move. There is also a very small risk that it might go through your uterus.

## How will it affect my next period?

Your period is likely to come on time or a few days early or late. Sometimes it can be a week late and sometimes even later.

You may have some irregular bleeding between taking Levonelle and your next period. This can range from spotting to being quite heavy.

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Your period may be on time, or a few days earlier or later than expected.

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Your next period should come at about the same time as you would normally expect it.

## Do I need to see a doctor or nurse afterwards?

You should see a doctor or nurse if:

- Your next period is more than seven days late, it is shorter or lighter than usual or you have any sudden or unusual pain in your lower abdomen. These could be signs of an ectopic pregnancy. Although this is not common, it is very serious
- You are worried that you might have a sexually transmitted infection.

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Follow the same advice as for Levonelle above.

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You should see a doctor or nurse 3–4 weeks after the IUD is fitted. This is to:

- check you are not pregnant
- discuss your future contraceptive needs
- remove the IUD if this is what you want.

The emergency IUD can be removed during your next period. If removed at any other time you will need to use additional contraception, such as condoms, for seven days before the emergency IUD is taken out.

## Can it fail?

Some women get pregnant even though Levonelle was taken correctly. You may also become pregnant if you delay taking it, have further unprotected sex or vomit within two hours of taking it. Speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. They may give you another dose or suggest an emergency IUD.

If you vomit later than two hours, Levonelle will have been absorbed.

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Some women get pregnant even though they took ellaOne correctly.

You may also become pregnant if you vomit within three hours of taking it. Speak to your doctor or nurse. They may give you another dose or suggest an emergency IUD. If you vomit later than three hours ellaOne will have been absorbed.

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If you cannot feel the IUD threads in the top of your vagina, or you can feel the IUD itself, you may not be protected against pregnancy. See your doctor or nurse straightaway and use additional contraception.

The IUD is very effective but if it fails there is a small increased risk of an ectopic pregnancy. The risk is less in women using an IUD than in women using no contraception at all. Seek advice as soon as possible.

## Can I continue to use other contraception?

If you forgot your regular pills or did not use the patch or vaginal ring correctly, you should take your regular pill again, insert a new ring or apply a new patch within 12 hours of taking Levonelle.

Use additional contraception, such as condoms:

- for seven days with the patch, the ring and the combined pill (nine days for Qlaira)
- for two days with the progestogen-only pill.

If you forgot your regular pill or did not use the patch or vaginal ring correctly, you should wait for five days after taking ellaOne before you take your pill again, insert a new ring or apply a new patch. Use additional contraception, such as condoms, during these five days.

After you restart your pill, patch or ring, you should continue to use additional contraception:

- with the patch, the ring and the combined pill for seven days (nine days for Qlaira)
- with the progestogen-only pill for two days.

If you want to go back to using your usual contraception, speak to a doctor or nurse about having the IUD removed or you can keep it as your regular method of contraception.

## A final word

This booklet can only give you general information. The information is based on evidence-guided research from the World Health Organisation and The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

All methods of contraception come with a Patient Information Leaflet which provides detailed information about the method. Remember - contact your doctor, practice nurse or a sexual health clinic if you are worried or unsure about anything.



talking sense about sex



[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

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