

Resolve to Prepare!

by Heather Boerner, 01.02.07

Katie (not her real name) is starting the year with something new: a prescription for emergency contraception (EC).

As part of her New Year's resolution, the 17-year-old Massachusetts resident is protecting herself in case a condom breaks or something worse happens. Should you do the same? Katie thinks so.

She's never had to use EC herself, but last year, her best friend needed it after having unprotected sex with her boyfriend. Katie drove an hour and a half to get Plan B, a brand of EC, for her friend and watched her friend panic over the possibility of not being able to get it in time.

"I've actually been meaning to pick up a prescription for myself just in case," says Katie. "I'm in a committed relationship, but anything can happen. It's a pill that can save you from having to make some really hard decisions."

The Facts about EC

EC lowers the risk of pregnancy when started within 120 hours of unprotected intercourse or contraceptive failure. And the sooner EC is administered, the better it works. Specifically, EC needs to be started within five days — or 120 hours — after unprotected intercourse. When started within 72 hours, EC can reduce the risk of pregnancy by 75 to 89 percent.

EC works by either preventing ovulation, which is the releasing of an egg by the ovary, or by preventing fertilization, which is when the sperm joins the egg. EC is a form of contraception, which means it prevents pregnancy before it happens. EC does not cause an abortion in women who are already pregnant, and it won't affect a developing embryo.

Clinical trials have shown that the pill is safer than aspirin, says Dr. Karen Lifford, medical director of Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts. "The reality is that it's so safe and effective," she says. "The danger of taking Plan B leading to side effects is close to zero. The chances that aspirin will cause side effects is higher."

Plan B is now available over the counter for women over 18. Women younger than that still need a prescription. In some states, pharmacists are permitted to prescribe Plan B and in other states, the law requires that emergency rooms have them available.

To get a prescription, you'll need to go through a quick medical questionnaire with your doctor, says Dr. Savita Ginde, medical director of Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains. Then, you can get the prescription filled and put the EC someplace you won't lose it. And if you should ever need it — say, if a condom breaks or slips — you'll be protected.

Know Your Options

Anne (not her real name), 16, took Plan B after "fooling around" with her boyfriend lead her to worry about whether she could get pregnant. Even though they didn't have penetrative sex, Anne wanted to make sure. "Because I knew Plan B was available, I worried less than I would have otherwise," she says.

Because Anne lives in California, where pharmacists can prescribe Plan B, Anne called around to different pharmacies and found one 15 minutes from her house that would prescribe it. She got it, took it, and had no side effects.



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"I would tell other girls going through the same thing that they just need to stay calm," she says. "They shouldn't freak out because we live in the time we do, and we have options."

Bonnie (not her real name) knew her options but was still scared to use Plan B when she had sex for the first time at 17 and the condom broke.

"I was completely terrified," she says. "I immediately freaked out and started bawling. My boyfriend called a friend of his who worked in a pharmacy to see if he could get me EC, but that didn't work."

Since this was three years ago, Bonnie says she felt like she had fewer options and less information than teens do today. On top of that, she's personally anti-abortion and comes from a conservative family where, she says, "They didn't like my boyfriend, they didn't like pre-marital sex, and I was really just too embarrassed to talk to them about it."

While she tried to hunt down Plan B, Bonnie decided to take four of her mother's expired birth control pills. She got sick. "It was a really stupid thing to do," she says. "But I was freaking out."

Eventually, Bonnie found a website where doctors would evaluate requests for Plan B and, if approved, fax the prescription to a pharmacy. Bonnie was approved and, on the fourth day after having sex, went to a pharmacy where no one knew her family and got the pill. When, a week later, she took a pregnancy test and it came up negative, she finally relaxed. But she never wants to go through that again, and thinks every teen should have a prescription for Plan B.

Think Ahead

"When I met my current boyfriend, I immediately went to my doctor and was put on birth control," says Bonnie, now 20. "I also got a prescription for EC that I haven't used."

Today, Bonnie would tell other girls to get a prescription ASAP.

"I'm so thankful for EC," she says. "I don't know if I'd have gotten pregnant without it, but I'm glad I didn't have to find out. I think it's a huge victory for anti-choicers and pro-choicers alike that it's available over the counter now."

To make an appointment to get EC, please call 1-800-230-PLAN for the Planned Parenthood center nearest you.

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