

ACCESSING NON-PRESCRIPTION EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION: THE BASICS

Emergency contraception is available without a prescription for consumers 18 and older at pharmacies and clinics.

What is emergency contraception (EC)? EC is an FDA-approved form of contraception also known as the “morning-after pill.” It is an extremely time-sensitive drug that is most effective in the first 12 to 24 hours following unprotected sex, birth control failure, or sexual assault. EC does not affect an existing pregnancy, and should not be confused with the “abortion pill,” known as RU-486. In August 2006, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a brand of EC – Plan B[®] – for over-the-counter use by consumers 18 and older.

Where is EC sold? Plan B[®] is available at pharmacies and health care clinics. The FDA requires that a health professional, such as a pharmacist or a physician, be available to answer questions about Plan B[®] if needed. As a result, Plan B[®] is not available in places like gas stations or convenience stores.

How do I get EC at a pharmacy? Individuals seeking EC – regardless of their age – need to ask for Plan B[®] at the pharmacy counter. If you are 18 or older, you only need to show identification. Anyone behind the pharmacy counter can sell Plan B[®] – including pharmacy technicians. If you are under 18, you need to have a prescription. (If you need help getting a prescription, go to <http://www.not-2-late.com>.)

But I thought that EC was now “over-the-counter” for individuals 18 and older? Because of restrictions placed on the sale of EC by the FDA, pharmacies can’t stock EC next to other over-the-counter products like aspirin. The term “over-the-counter” indicates that those 18 and older may purchase EC without first getting a prescription.

Who can buy EC? The FDA approved over-the-counter access to Plan B[®] for all *consumers* age 18 and older. Thus, both women and men who are 18 or older can request the drug at a pharmacy or health clinic, contingent upon showing an appropriate ID.

What forms of ID do individuals age 18 and older need to buy EC? The FDA did not list specific forms of ID that must be presented to verify a consumer’s age, and that decision is left to individual pharmacies. A driver’s license or passport is certainly sufficient, and other forms of ID should be accepted as well.

How is the age restriction enforced? Duramed Pharmaceuticals, Inc., the company that produces Plan B[®], monitors pharmacies that provide EC. In the case of violations, Duramed will first educate pharmacy staff but subsequent violations will result in reports to the state Board of Pharmacy.

How much does Plan B[®] cost? Duramed’s wholesale price for Plan B[®] is \$27; the actual price at pharmacies is usually about \$35 but may run as high as \$55. NWLC and others are working to get EC covered by Medicaid and by private insurance in states where it is not already covered.

My state has a law that allows participating pharmacists to dispense EC without a doctor’s prescription. AK, CA, HI, ME, MA, NH, NM, VT and WA have these types of laws. The FDA’s decision does not affect minors’ access to EC under these laws. Women under 18 can still get Plan B[®] directly from a participating pharmacist in those states. For more information, see <http://www.EC-Help.org>.

We want to know about your EC OTC experience! Call 1-866-Pill4Us or email info@nwlc.org and tell us about your success – or if you run into any problems – obtaining Plan B[®].