



The South Carolina  
Emergency  
Contraception  
Initiative

# The Facts About Emergency Birth Control Pills

Reproductive health experts call emergency birth control pills (also known as emergency contraception, the ‘morning after pill,’ or Plan B®) the nation’s best kept secret because few American women are aware that they can do anything *after sex* to *prevent* pregnancy. Women can use emergency birth control pills to prevent pregnancy when they have had unprotected sex for any reason, such as: they have been sexually assaulted; they incorrectly use their regular contraceptive method; their regular method fails or they are on medications that interfere with their regular method’s proper action; or they have not yet initiated a regular method of contraception. No woman should have to face an unwanted pregnancy when a method exists to prevent it. Yet, South Carolina’s young women face significant barriers to receiving and using emergency birth control pills to prevent pregnancy.

## Emergency Birth Control Pills Prevent Unintended or Unwanted Pregnancy.

- Experts estimate that that nearly 40 percent of all pregnancies—and up to 85 percent of teen pregnancies—in the United States each year are unintended.<sup>1,2</sup> Moreover, experts estimate that timely use of emergency birth control pills could prevent up to 50 percent of these unintended pregnancies.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Experts also estimate that timely use of emergency birth control pills could prevent up to 70 percent of *all* abortions among American women.<sup>2</sup>
- Emergency birth control pills are the most commonly used method of emergency contraception. Emergency birth control pills contain the same hormonal medications that are in ordinary birth control pills.<sup>2</sup>
- Emergency birth control pills are up to 89 percent effective in preventing a pregnancy, depending on the type of emergency birth control used, how quickly the pills are begun, and when during a woman’s menstrual cycle the sex occurred.<sup>2</sup> Emergency birth control pills are most effective when taken within the first 24 hours after sex. But they are still effective, although somewhat less so, when taken up to 120 hours after sex.<sup>4,5,6</sup>
- Emergency birth control pills work like regular birth control pills: they delay ovulation and may inhibit fertilization. It is possible, though unproven, that emergency birth control pills may also prevent implantation.<sup>7,8</sup>
- The medical community widely agrees that pregnancy begins when implantation is complete – so, even if emergency birth control pills prevent implantation, they do *not* end pregnancy. Emergency birth control pills *prevent* pregnancy.<sup>2,7,8</sup> Emergency birth control pills will not harm an already existing pregnancy.<sup>2,6,8</sup>
- Emergency birth control pills, such as Plan B®, have been approved for use by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

## Adolescent and Young Adult Women in South Carolina Need Access to Emergency Birth Control Pills.

- According to the most recent data available, South Carolina’s adolescent pregnancy rate in 2000 (89 per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19) was slightly higher than the national rate (84 per 1,000).<sup>9,10</sup>
- In 2003, there were an estimated 9500 pregnancies among teenagers in South Carolina.<sup>26</sup>

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- South Carolina’s non-Hispanic black and Latina teens had lower pregnancy rates (116 and 126 per 1,000, respectively) than their non-Hispanic black and Latina peers in the United States as a whole (153 and 138 per 1,000, respectively). White teens in South Carolina, by contrast, had a higher pregnancy rate (71 per 1,000) than did their white peers in the United States as a whole (55 per 1,000).<sup>9</sup>
- Emergency birth control is particularly important for survivors of sexual assault or rape. Women ages 15 through 24 suffer the overwhelming majority of the approximately 300,000 rapes and sexual assaults that occur each year in the United States.<sup>11,12</sup> Experts estimate that in the United States, at least 25,000 pregnancies occur each year as a result of reported rapes and sexual assaults.<sup>13</sup> Experts also estimate that 22,000 of these pregnancies could be prevented with the timely use of emergency birth control pills.<sup>13</sup>
- In August 2006, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ruled that young women (and men) ages 18 and older can obtain Plan B<sup>®</sup>, the only prepackaged, dedicated emergency birth control pill product, without a prescription. Women under age 18 still need a prescription to obtain Plan B<sup>®</sup>.<sup>25</sup>
- In South Carolina, the law requires that hospital emergency rooms provide emergency birth control pills to sexual assault survivors who ask for them.<sup>14</sup>

## Respected Medical Organizations Support the Use of Emergency Birth Control Pills, But South Carolina’s Young Women Face Barriers to Getting Them

- *Worry about emergency birth control pills’ safety*—Respected professional medical organizations, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Academy of Pediatrics, Society for Adolescent Medicine, American Medical Association, American Medical Women’s Association, and World Health Organization, among others, support women’s access to emergency birth control pills because they are entirely safe and effective.<sup>2,7,15,16,17,18</sup>
- *Unnecessary tests*—The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Society for Adolescent Medicine, and other respected medical organizations assert that, because emergency birth control pills are not dangerous under any known circumstances, routine screening is entirely unnecessary. This means that young women do not need a pelvic exam, pregnancy test, or other laboratory work before being provided with or given a prescription for emergency birth control pills.<sup>2,7</sup> Such tests constitute a major barrier to young women’s accessing the care they need.
- *Confidentiality*—Fear that their confidentiality will be violated keeps many young women from accessing needed contraceptive services.<sup>19,20</sup>
- *Cost*—Cost is a major barrier to young women’s using contraception, whether they live in South Carolina or elsewhere. One state’s health department noted that 64 percent of women ages 15 to 44 using some form of contraception had out-of-pocket health expenditures 68 percent higher than their male counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Experts attribute higher health costs for women to reproductive health services that are not covered by private health insurance.<sup>21,22</sup>
- *Shortage of affordable providers*—Experts estimate that about 250,000 women in South Carolina are in need of publicly supported contraceptive services. At the same time, publicly funded family planning clinics in South Carolina have served as many as 139,000 people and averted more than 32,000 pregnancies across the state each year.<sup>23</sup> Yet, new reports indicate that almost one-third of the Department of Health and Environmental Control’s family planning clinics have closed, making it much harder for poor and very young women to find affordable and confidential contraceptive services, including emergency birth control pills.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

To reduce unintended and unwanted pregnancy, South Carolina’s young women need affordable access to contraceptive services, including emergency birth control pills. Pregnancy and childbirth are potentially serious health issues for any young woman. Increasing access to emergency birth control pills among South Carolina’s 16- to 24-year-old women can help to prevent unintended pregnancies (and abortions) in this age group. No young woman should have to choose between childbirth and abortion when remedies exist to *prevent* unintended and unwanted pregnancy.

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