



# What is Plan B®?

*Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer*

**The condom broke! A shocking** discovery, but not necessarily the “disaster” that

it could be. There is a “Plan B®.”

Fortunately, there is the option of emergency contraception which may help prevent a pregnancy after unprotected sex. By unprotected sex we include that no method of birth control was used, that a method of birth control was used but did not work—like a condom breaking— or that a woman was forced to have sex when she did not want to. In these situations, emergency. While not guaranteed successful, it does improve the odds significantly.

Two methods of emergency contraception are the most common. One is hormonal, entailing taking doses of estrogen and progesterone, or progesterone alone in a drug called Plan B®. The alternative is non-hormonal: insertion of a copper intrauterine device—IUD— by doctor.

The Plan B option is one of the so-called “morning-after” or emergency contraceptive pills. Plan B contains levonorgestrel, the same hormone found in regular birth control pills. It stops pregnancy from occurring by preventing the release of the egg from the uterus, or from being fertilized. It may also prevent the egg from attaching to the uterus.

This is exactly what the birth control pill does. The difference in dosage and how it is used. Plan B must be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex. It consists of one tablet immediately, and a second 12 hours later.

It is critical to note that Plan B has nothing to do with the so-called “abortion pill” RU-486. In fact, Plan B will not even work if you are pregnant!

Nor is Plan B a substitute for proper birth control. More importantly, Plan B clearly does nothing to protect against HIV or sexually-transmitted disease. And, Plan B will not work if taken before intercourse—not much of a birth control option, is it? Unless there is an emergency, that is.

There are cautions to consider before taking Plan B. The first concern is if the woman is allergic to levonorgestrel or any of the ingredients in Plan B. A conversation with your doctor or pharmacist is an important consideration. There are also side effects to consider, albeit fewer than with other emergency contraceptives. There may be bleeding from the vagina for a few days afterwards; there could be nausea, and very rarely vomiting. Cramps, tiredness, headache and breast tenderness may also be present for a few days after.

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Getting Plan B used to entail a visit to a doctor, a prescription and then a visit to the pharmacist. No longer. Considering the urgency

of the situation—think long weekend or worse— this was not always an option for a woman. In Canada, since April 2005, Plan B® has been available directly from the pharmacy without prescription. The pharmacist does have to be accredited in the Emergency Contraception program from the College of Pharmacists, and not all pharmacies decide to offer the emergency contraception.

Emergency contraception is not an alternative to regular birth control, nor is it any protection against STDs. But it can provide an option in an otherwise difficult situation.