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Sexual Health & Family Planning Australia Statement on Emergency Contraception

Emergency contraception reduces the risk of unintended pregnancy after unprotected sexual intercourse. It can also be used when contraception may have failed, e.g. broken condom, missed pill or after sexual assault.

There are only 2 types of emergency contraception available in Australia: the emergency contraceptive pill and the copper intrauterine contraceptive device (IUD).

The emergency contraceptive pill is most common and consists of a 1.5mg dose of levonorgestrel, sold under the following brand names: Postinor, NorLevo and Levonelle.

A copper IUD can also be used as emergency contraception if inserted up to 5 days after unprotected sex and is the most effective form of emergency contraception. The IUD can then provide immediate ongoing contraception. However, insertion of a copper IUD is a specialised medical procedure and access to a copper IUD within the required timeframe can therefore be difficult.

Sexual Health & Family Planning Australia (SH&FPA) is aware of international reports that the emergency contraceptive pill may not work in women weighing more than 80kg, and begins to lose its effectiveness for women who weigh over 75kg.

SH&FPA has consulted the International Consortium for Emergency Contraception (ICEC) and the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) about the recently released reports. A spokesperson from the TGA explained, "The TGA is currently reviewing the available information to determine whether any action is required in Australia."

At time of writing, SH&FPA has assessed that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the efficacy of the emergency contraceptive pill in women with higher BMIs is reduced to the extent that it should not be offered to these women. As such, in the absence of an alternative, the emergency contraceptive pill readily available in Australia, which is extremely safe, may still offer some benefit in preventing an unintended pregnancy and is better than nothing.

As an overall strategy for reducing the need for emergency contraception, SH&FPA supports increased access to long acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), such as implants and IUDs. LARCs have been proven to significantly reduce rates of unintended pregnancy and abortion.

SH&FPA will work in consultation with the TGA and the ICEC to ascertain any necessary changes to emergency contraceptive pill practice in Australia. Until we have more conclusive evidence, the emergency contraceptive pill and the copper IUD are two suitable options for any Australian woman seeking emergency contraception.

(Ulipristal acetate, a more effective emergency contraceptive pill option, is not currently available in Australia.)