

Sex Talk

Promoting Sexual Health for Youth

Editor's Note:

Birth Control sometimes doesn't work. What is a woman to do if the condom breaks or she has forced intercourse? Studies indicate there is a lack of knowledge among women and health care professionals about emergency methods of contraception.

The Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit is launching an information campaign on emergency contraceptive pills (ECP) this spring, aimed at women 17-24 years of age and health care professionals.

Each year in the Grey-Bruce area almost 200 teenagers become pregnant and 35% of these pregnancies end in abortion. The most recent survey in 1994 shows women aged 15-19 have the highest proportion of abortions, followed by the 20-24 year age group. Perhaps these numbers could be reduced with awareness of emergency contraception. This first issue of Sex Talk examines ECP as a safe, effective method of emergency contraception when

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILLS - THEY'RE NOT JUST FOR THE MORNING AFTER

taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex or failed birth control.

Sarah had been going with Mark, her boyfriend, for one year. In the last few months, they had started to have intercourse and were using a condom. On the weekend, Sarah and Mark had intercourse and the condom broke.

Sarah was terrified of getting pregnant because she was only 17 years old and was planning to attend college in another year. "I had heard that there was this pill you could take after you had sex, so I called the Sexual Health Clinic."

The staff at the clinic told Sarah that she could take the emergency contraceptive pill (ECP) within 72 hours of having unprotected intercourse and the pill would have a good chance of preventing pregnancy.

At the clinic, Sarah received positive counselling about the ECP and about longer term methods of birth control. She was offered the ECP and she decided to take it.

"When I took the pill, I felt quite emotional about it," she says. "It wasn't just taking any pill; it was an important decision."

The last thing she felt she needed at the moment was moralizing. She was glad the counselling she received at the clinic was warm, positive and informative.

"I was grateful that I was able to get the pill and be dealt with sensitively at the same time," she says. "No one gave me any lectures."

Afterwards, she felt confident that she had done the right thing. "I felt very relieved that I didn't have to have an abortion," she says.

The emergency contraceptive pill is available in the Grey-Bruce area - at birth control clinics, in emergency rooms at hospitals, at walk-in clinics, and sometimes from family doctors. Unfortunately, a lot of women who need it don't know about it.

PUBLIC CAMPAIGN

The Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound is hoping to change that through a public information campaign aimed at young women aged 17 to 24.

The health unit will also be mailing kits to doctors in the Grey-Bruce area, including posters and practice guidelines covering the emergency contraceptive pill. Young women said they hadn't been getting information about emergency contraception from their doctors.

"We want to make doctors aware that they need to offer this to their patients or refer them to someone who will offer it," says Betty Perkins of the public health unit.

Some people criticize the emergency contraceptive pill, mistakenly thinking it is a kind of abortion. On the contrary, Perkins observes, it keeps women from having to seek an abortion.

Dr. Miriam Kaufman of the Hospital for Sick Children explains ECP is birth control rather than abortion because it prevents the fertilized egg from attaching to the

endometrium, so a pregnancy never occurs.

The emergency contraceptive pill is considered effective in 75 to 98 per cent of the cases in which it is used, depending on where the woman is in her monthly cycle when she takes it.

72 HOURS

It used to be called the "morning after pill" but that name was dropped as being so restrictive that it was actually inaccurate.

"It's not just a morning after pill," Dr. Kaufman notes. "You should take it as soon as possible after unprotected sex, but a wait of up to 72 hours appears to have no impact on the method's effectiveness.

"There is no evidence that taking it later, for example, at 72 hours, is less effective than taking it immediately after unprotected intercourse," she explains.

It is a higher dose of estrogen and progesterone than is found in the regular birth control pill. A woman is given two pills as soon as possible, Dr. Kaufman says, and two pills 12 hours later with an anti-nausea medication. Twenty per cent of the women who take it throw up, she says.

Studies show that young women who have taken ECP don't use it as a regular method of birth control. They use it, instead, as a back-up when their regular birth control method is unexpectedly not used or is obviously ineffective.

The emergency contraceptive pill can well be used when the condom rips, when the woman has missed a few days of her birth control pill or when a couple has unplanned, unprotected sex. It is always appropriate in cases of

forced sex, says Perkins. Perkins quotes well-known contraception pioneer Dr. Marion Powell at a conference last year: "If a woman tells you she needs it, she needs it."

The particular circumstances aren't important.

"This is an emergency," Perkins observes. "Afterwards, you can counsel the person about long-term birth control."

VERY SAFE

The emergency contraceptive pill is very safe, says Dr. Kaufman.

"In general, it's probably safer to take this on a one-time basis than to be on the birth control pill for a length of time, and the birth control pill is pretty safe," she says. "It would only be if someone had breast cancer or ovarian cancer or has had blood clots that you probably shouldn't use ECP."

Women with those health problems could take progesterone alone, without the estrogen, for emergency contraception, Dr. Kaufman suggests. Dr. Kaufman says the American College of Physicians has no reports of major cardiovascular or neurological side effects from use of the emergency contraceptive pill.

Although some people feel that if the emergency contraceptive pill fails and a pregnancy occurs, an abortion is recommended because of the high dose of hormones the fertilized egg was exposed to, Dr. Kaufman disagrees.

"There are enough documented pregnancies that have gone to term that we know this is not a problem," she states. "Failure of the emergency contraceptive pill is not an indication for abortion, although a normal outcome to any pregnancy

cannot be guaranteed,” says Kaufman.

FIELD TRIPS

Teachers can be a great help by letting young women know that emergency contraception exists and is not difficult to get, says Perkins.

Giving out the phone number of the Sexual Health Clinic can educate a lot of young people in this important area.

“It would be very helpful for teachers to arrange field trips to birth control clinics.

“This demystifies the issues for young people,” adds Perkins.

It is especially important right now for word to spread among young women about the existence and availability of the emergency contraceptive pill.

“We think there has been an increase in teen pregnancies,” Perkins says. “We hear it from people working in clinics and schools.” Because recorded statistics always run a few years behind, anecdotal evidence is all that is available on the current state of the teen pregnancy rate.

IN CRISIS

Perkins says that young women are usually frightened and in crisis when they seek emergency contraception. They need to be treated with a calm, informative and positive manner.

PLACES TO GET ECP

Sexual Health Clinics:

920 - 1st Avenue West
Owen Sound
376-9420
1-800-263-3456

30 Park Street
Walkerton
881-1920
1-800-821-7714

162 High Street
Southampton
797-2010
1-800-230-7719

Emergency Rooms

Walk-in Clinic:

976 - 2nd Avenue West
Owen Sound
519-372-3303

“They need to be reassured that they can get the ECP and there’s a good chance that pregnancy will not occur,” she says. “You don’t question what got them into the crisis, but you let them know that they’re smart to find a way to deal with it.

“In a tactful way, you let them know what help exists to prevent a further incident, such as hooking them up with ongoing birth control.”

Lee Fawcett says the Sexual Health Clinic in Owen Sound where

SEX AND THE AGE OF CONSENT

For most kinds of sex acts, the minimum age is 14.

The law is not always clear in defining “sex”; but sex can include activities like posing for nude photos, intercourse, oral sex or touching.

The law makes an exception for youth between the ages of 12 and 14 who are sexually active with someone no more than two years older. For example, a 15 year old cannot be charged for having consensual intercourse with a 13 year old, but it is illegal for a 16 year old to have consensual intercourse with a 13 year old.

There are no exceptions to the laws prohibiting sex with children under age 12, and anal sex is illegal for anyone under 18, except within marriage.

People in positions of trust can be charged if they have any type of sexual activity with someone under the age of 18. This includes babysitters, coaches, camp counsellors, parents, teachers, guardians, lifeguards or anyone who is financially supporting a person under the age of 18. If the person in the position of trust is also under 18 years old, they can still be charged.

she works deals with this situation frequently. “We give out the emergency contraceptive pill on a regular basis,” she says. “Last night, a 17 year old came in for them. Mostly, they’ll say that the condom came off or broke, but sometimes they just say they weren’t using any birth control. She ended up going away with the birth control pill. It gave us the opportunity to counsel her. That’s one of the benefits of it. Also, it saves people having to make the

decision on whether to have an abortion.”

Perkins says the faster word spreads on emergency contraception and how to get it, the better for everyone.

“I’m sorry there are so many women who don’t know that you can get emergency contraceptive pills,” she says. “Instead, they go through the terrible trauma of waiting to see if they are pregnant.

“The ECP is a much more sensible way of dealing with the matter.”

USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS FOR YOUTH

Crisis Intervention, Owen Sound

Ask for Crisis Team..... 519-376-2121

Sexual Assault Centre of Grey-Bruce

24-hour hotline..... 1-800-720-7411

“Choices” - Drug & Alcohol

Counselling for Youth..... 1-800-265-3133

519-371-5487

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

The Sexual Health Clinic at the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit provides confidential service for adolescents and young adult males and females. We provide counselling and service on a variety of issues including abstinence, birth control options, emergency contraception, pregnancy, STDs and AIDS. Both STD and HIV testing are available through the clinic, as well as hepatitis B immunization. The staff are relaxed and approachable and, of course, confidential. Our clinics are located in Owen Sound, Walkerton and Port Elgin. Please call the following numbers for further information about our clinic hours.

Owen Sound.....1-800-263-3456

Walkerton1-800-821-7714

Port Elgin.....1-800-230-7719

The public health nurses in our program also act as consultants and provide resources for individuals and community agencies and groups. We also respond to requests for educational workshops and group sessions.

What's New in Resources?

The following materials are available for free loan from the health unit.

VIDEOS

"AIDS: What Everyone Needs to Know" - 3rd Edition (USA), 1995, 21 minutes.

This is a current video geared to teen and adult audiences. Current trends, clear information (including correct condom use) and anecdotes from people living with HIV/AIDS are included.

"AIDS: Family Album" - CBC, 1994, 25 minutes.

This is the story of Don and Elma Plant, a young couple from Huron County who are both living with AIDS; their three young children are also portrayed in the video. Don and Elma have spoken in many Grey-Bruce secondary schools. An excellent look at how a rural family is coping with HIV/AIDS. For preteens to adults.

"One Million Teenagers" - USA, 1995, 25 minutes.

This video looks at teens and STDs. While the numbers quoted are American, excellent information about STDs (their prevention and treatment) is presented by teen peer educators in an upbeat manner.

"Teen Sex: Challenge and Decision" - 1995, 26 minutes.

Dr. Stephen Genuis presents factual information to combat myths, mixed messages and incomplete information. Includes dramatic re-enactments by teen actors. Issues addressed are teen sexuality, STDs and decision-making.

BOOK REPORT

"Easy For You to Say: Q and A's for Teens Living with Chronic Illness or Disability" - by Dr. Miriam Kaufman, M.D. Key Porter Books, 1995.

Dr. Kaufman is a pediatrician who works with teens at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Her book

includes chapters on friends and dating, alcohol, drugs and medication, and sexuality, among others. It's

a great, no-nonsense book from teens' perspectives for teens, parents, teachers, and health care pro-

fessionals. Dr. Kaufman includes short blurbs about many common chronic illnesses and disabilities.



Sex Talk is a new publication from the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit to promote sexual health for youth. The publication is revised and adapted from the City of Toronto Department of Public Health's Sex Talk. To contribute ideas, comments or materials, please call Sue Askin, Sexual Health Program Manager, at 519-376-9420 (1-800-263-3456) or fax 519-376-7782.

EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVE PILLS

Questions may arise about emergency contraceptive pills (ECP).

Here are some typical questions - and information to help you with your answers.

Q. What is emergency contraception?

A. Emergency contraception can prevent a pregnancy when used soon after a single act of unprotected intercourse. The most widely used is Emergency Contraceptive Pills (ECP), also known as the Morning After Pill (MAP). Intrauterine devices (IUD) are also used, but not commonly for teenage women. The IUD can be inserted up to 7 days after unprotected intercourse.

Q. What is in ECP?

A. ECP is essentially a larger, double dose of a regular birth control pill. The most commonly used pill is the Ovral oral contraceptive.

Q. How does it work?

A. ECP temporarily disrupts ovarian hormone production. It may prevent ovulation or implantation of the egg.

Q. How is it taken?

A. Two pills are taken as soon as possible, up to 72 hours after unprotected intercourse. Two more pills are taken 12 hours after the first dose.

Q. Are there side effects?

A. Many women feel nauseated. They may vomit, have diarrhea, tender breasts, or spot before their period. Many clinics give Gravol with the ECP. Women are told to take it a half hour before their pills. Women are advised to eat when they take ECP.

Q. What if a woman vomits after taking the first dose?

A. Many clinics give two extra pills in case she vomits. If she vomits two to three hours after taking her pills, she does not need to take the extra pills.

Q. How effective is ECP?

A. In a cross-Canada study, ECP was found to be between 75% and 98% effective when taken within 72 hours.

Q. Under what circumstances might a woman want to take ECP?

A. If birth control fails, such as condom breakage, if no birth control method was used, or if she was forced to have intercourse, she can consider using ECP. It is not effective if there is another act of unprotected intercourse earlier or later in the cycle. It is helpful for a woman to know the date of her last menstrual period so she can calculate how close to ovulation she had unprotected intercourse.

Q. What if a woman is using the birth control pill and missed a few pills?

A. She should check with her doctor to see if she needs ECP.

Q. When should she expect her period?

A. She should get her period at the expected time or 21 days after taking ECP.

Q. What if her period doesn't come?

A. She should go to a doctor or clinic for a pregnancy test. If she is pregnant and clear about not wanting to continue the pregnancy, she can have an abortion.

Q. What if she wants to continue the pregnancy?

A. Although most clinics caution a woman about the possibility of ECP's affecting an embryo or fetus, there is no clear evidence of congenital defects.

Q. Where can she get ECP?

A. Part of the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit's current information campaign is directed at physicians. Any physician should be able to offer ECP. Birth control clinics offer it; some hospitals and walk-in clinics do as well.

Q. How often can a woman take ECP?

A. ECP can be safely taken several times in one cycle, although it's intended for emergency use. If a woman is coming back again and again for emergency treatment, it would be worthwhile to find out what the barriers are to regular contraceptive use.

Q. How much does ECP cost?

A. ECP is free at sexual health clinics as well as some walk-in clinics, emergency departments and doctors' offices.