

Gov says he'll push morning-after pill

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BY [LORI RACKL](#) Health Reporter

If the Food and Drug Administration doesn't act quickly to make the morning-after pill available without a doctor's prescription, Illinois will.

That's the message being sent to the FDA today in a letter from Gov. Blagojevich, who urged the agency to end more than three years of "stalling" and approve over-the-counter sales of the emergency contraceptive Plan B.

To seek Legislature's OK

"The evidence is clear and overwhelming that making Plan B available over-the-counter is the right thing to do," the two-page letter reads. "If the FDA fails to act, as governor, I will move forward to enact legislation on our own."

9 STATES OK SALE

States that allow women to get Plan B without a doctor's prescription:

Alaska
California
Hawaii
Maine
Massachusetts
New Hampshire
New Mexico
Vermont
Washington

Blagojevich vowed to introduce a bill during the fall veto session that would make Illinois the 10th state to allow women to get Plan B directly from pharmacies. These states let specially trained pharmacists write Plan B prescriptions on the spot.

The governor said his lawyers are looking into whether he can make the necessary changes without the General Assembly's approval -- an executive power Blagojevich said he would use if lawmakers shot down his plan.

Blagojevich's letter follows the FDA's recent resurrection of a controversial bid to widen women's access to Plan B, a two-pill regimen containing a high dose of the main ingredient in regular birth-control pills. The emergency contraception reduces the risk of pregnancy up to 89 percent when taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex.

Plan B's makers asked the FDA for permission to sell the drug over-the-counter in 2003. FDA advisers overwhelmingly endorsed the plan for all ages, but the agency has yet to make a final decision -- a delay critics say puts politics ahead of science.

Conservatives have opposed easier access to the morning-after pill for numerous reasons. Some equate it to early abortion, although research indicates the medication works mainly by delaying ovulation and won't do anything if a woman is already pregnant.

Last week, the FDA told Barr Pharmaceuticals it would reconsider over-the-counter sales, but only to women age 18 and older. Minors would still need a prescription, and the drug would be kept behind the pharmacy counter. After both sides met Tuesday, a Barr spokeswoman said her company would submit a revised application to the FDA within two weeks.

If Blagojevich goes forward with his legislation, it wouldn't be the first attempt in Illinois to circumvent the FDA on Plan B. State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago) introduced a bill in 2004 that would have allowed women of any age to get pharmacist-initiated prescriptions. It never made it to the House floor for a vote. "This bill is a lift -- it's a lot of work to try and pass," Feigenholtz said. "But I'm very optimistic. I think it's going to happen."

Blagojevich agreed the climate is right to push this through Springfield.

"This is an issue increasingly on the minds of a lot of people," he said. "When you bring the power of a governor's office, and the bully pulpit that goes along with it . . . I think we have a very good chance of being successful."

One group that hopes he's wrong is the Catholic Conference of Illinois, which has lobbied against previous attempts to widen access to Plan B. Executive Director Robert Gilligan said he doesn't buy arguments that emergency contraception reduces abortion rates, and he's worried that using it without consulting a physician could jeopardize a woman's health.

'Safer than aspirin'

"There's a history of FDA panels saying other drugs are safe as well, and later we find they aren't," Gilligan said. "Here we are, requiring a prescription for normal contraception. Yet Plan B, which is just a higher dosage of that same medicine, wouldn't require a prescription."

Dr. Mandy Gittler said Plan B is "safer than aspirin." Gittler is a Chicago family practice physician who also has a women's health clinic in Washington, where pharmacists have been writing Plan B prescriptions for years. "The FDA should do what the evidence and science support, and that's make it over-the-counter."

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