

Morning-after pill OK without prescription

August 25, 2006

BY [ERIC HERMAN](#) Staff Reporter

Birth control entered a new era Thursday, as the Food and Drug Administration decided to permit the sale of a morning-after pill without a doctor's prescription.

Unlike regular birth control pills, morning-after pills are taken after sex. The approved drug -- known as Plan B -- could be ready for over-the-counter sale by late fall.

"It's a very good thing. I think we as a country struggle with our unintended pregnancy rate," said Dr. Melissa Gilliam, associate professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Chicago.

PLAN B

- Reduces the chance of pregnancy by 89 percent if taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex.
- Consists of two pills taken 12 hours apart or at the same time.
- Has no effect if a woman is already pregnant.
- Sells for \$25 to \$40 in prescription form, and could cost more in over-the-counter form.
- Can already be purchased without a doctor's prescription in nine states.

Eric Herman

Under 18 need prescription

The FDA's move allows Barr Pharmaceuticals, based in Woodcliff Lake, N.J., to sell Plan B to anyone 18 and older without a prescription.

Restrictions will remain, though. The drug will be sold from behind the pharmacist's counter, and people under 18 will need a prescription.

Plan B cuts chances of pregnancy by 89 percent if taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex. It is most effective if taken within 24 hours -- one reason Barr and some family-planning advocates pushed for over-the-counter status.

Some Plan B opponents predicted dire social consequences from the FDA's move.

Social consequences feared

"Does anybody really believe that people under 18 won't be able to obtain Plan B? I think it's going to lead to situations that devalue human relationships and increase promiscuity," said Robert Gilligan, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Illinois.

Barr's FDA application became a political rallying point. Gov. Blagojevich pledged to make Plan B available from pharmacists if the FDA failed to act. Two U.S. senators, including Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), had blocked confirmation of an FDA commissioner because the agency had not acted on Plan B.

State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago), who introduced legislation in 2004 to make morning-after purchases easier, criticized the FDA for putting up "barriers" for teens who wanted the drug.

But she said she was delighted by the FDA's move, and predicted it would lead to fewer abortions.

Like some birth control pills, Plan B delivers a type of hormone called a progestin. Gilliam said the effects of repeated use were not certain, but noted that where such "emergency contraceptives" are already available, "we don't see repeated use over time."

"I don't anticipate that there would be any health risk at all from repeated use," Gilliam said.

Some have expressed fear Plan B would lead people to rely on it as a primary means of birth control.

But a study published last year in the Journal of the American Medical Association found no change in sexual behavior or birth control habits when the drugs were available.

Costs more than condoms

Plan B's cost could prevent it from becoming a fallback contraceptive, said Dr. Mandy Gittler, a family practice physician. In prescription form, it sells for \$25 to \$40 per dose, and the over-the-counter version is expected to cost more, according to Barr. Meanwhile, a package of 12 Trojan condoms can be purchased for \$11.99, and a box of six Today contraceptive sponges retails for \$16.99.

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