

# RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

## **Emergency Contraception: A Sound Moral Choice**

For people of faith, making informed decisions about having children is an essential part of living responsibly and morally. But in the complex world of human relationships, there are far too many situations in which contraception is not used or fails, a condom tears, or a woman is sexually assaulted. In these and similar situations, emergency contraception (EC) should be readily available for pregnancy prevention.

Emergency contraception, sometimes called “back-up birth control,” is a concentrated dose of ordinary birth control pills. Approved for use by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), EC can prevent pregnancy when taken up to 72 hours after unprotected intercourse or contraceptive failure (although it is more effective in the first 24 hours). It cannot interrupt or disrupt an established pregnancy. EC has been endorsed as safe and effective by the medical establishment, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Society for Adolescent Medicine, and the American Medical Association.

### **Why Do We Need EC?**

Nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended. While women of all ages have unintended or unwelcome pregnancies, teens are especially vulnerable and, after birth, are routinely left to shoulder the demands of parenthood. The United States has one of the highest rates of unintended teen pregnancy among industrialized nations. Approximately 80% of pregnancies among women under the age of 20 are unintended. Half of all unintended pregnancies end in abortion.

EC would help teens, women, and families avoid the often-devastating effects of unintended pregnancy—including serious health risks to infants, economic hardships, marital dissolution, and spousal abuse. With greater availability, EC could prevent as many as 89% of the unintended pregnancies in the United States each year and dramatically reduce the need for abortion. In 2000 alone, according to The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 51,000 abortions were prevented by the use of EC. Additionally, EC could prevent many of the nearly 25,000 pregnancies that result from rape each year.

### **EC Gains Support**

Although emergency contraception has been administered to rape victims in some hospital emergency rooms for more than two decades, few women knew about EC until the FDA approved two EC products for sale by prescription in 2000. Since then, two measures that would enable women to make informed decisions about EC have been introduced in Congress, with the support of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. One would provide funds for a national public education campaign about emergency contraception, to increase understanding and use. The second would establish a program to ensure that rape victims are provided with medically accurate and unbiased information about EC and promptly receive EC when they request it. This provision would apply to all hospitals receiving federal funds.

### **Political Interference**

Because EC is effective for only a short time, availability is crucial. Women have consistently voiced their support for better access to EC only to meet resistance from the FDA under the Bush Administration.

The FDA's refusal to approve an application to make EC available over-the-counter, without a prescription, has become a source of great concern for women's, health, scientific, and religious groups. The continuing denials and delays—even though the FDA's own expert scientific panel supported the application by a resounding vote of 23-4—has led to charges of political interference in a decision that should be based on scientific facts.

The latest evidence that EC should be readily available is a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, demonstrating that using emergency contraception does not lead to more risky sexual behavior or other health risks for women.

### **Religious Support for Contraception**

Most faith groups consider using birth control and bringing children into the world with planning and preparation to be morally responsible. For example:

**The Presbyterian Church (USA):** “Unintended pregnancies lead to higher rates of infant mortality, low birth weight, and maternal morbidity and threaten the economic viability of families.”

**The United Methodist Church's Resolution on Responsible Parenthood:** In order to “support the sacred dimensions of personhood, all possible efforts should be made by parents and the community to ensure that each child enters the world with a healthy body, and is born into an environment conducive to realization of his or her potential.”

**The Episcopal Church:** Human life “should be initiated only advisedly and in full accord with this understanding of the power to conceive and give birth that is bestowed by God.”

**Jewish movements** have a long history of support for contraception, dating to the 1929 Reform resolution noting that birth control contributes to social stability.

### **Facts About Unintended Pregnancy**

About half of women aged 15-44 have had an unintended pregnancy. These include:

- 81 percent of pregnancies to women under 20
- 75 percent of pregnancies to women over 40
- 75 percent of pregnancies to women with incomes below poverty level
- 40 percent of pregnancies to unmarried women
- One-third of pregnancies to married women

### **What You Can Do**

- Discuss unintended pregnancy with your congregation. Encourage clergy to give sermons on responsible parenthood and talk about contraception during counseling sessions.
- Adopt denominational and faith group statements on unintended pregnancy.
- Work in your community to introduce state programs that offer emergency contraception directly from pharmacies. Oppose pharmacists' unethical attempts to refuse to dispense EC.
- Tell your state and U.S. legislators that you support making EC available over-the-counter.
- Contact the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice for assistance in conducting educational programs about unintended pregnancy and emergency contraception.

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The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition comprises Protestant, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country.

#### **For more information contact:**

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