FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
The Impact of Weight on Efficacy of Emergency Contraception

There are many different factors that women consider when seeking emergency contraception (EC), including affordability and availability. Now, emerging data indicate that consumers should also take body weight into account when selecting a back-up method of birth control. This data led manufacturer HRA Pharma to change the label of its levonorgestrel product, NorLevo®, the European equivalent of Plan B One-Step®. This has raised the question of whether U.S. labels for levonorgestrel-based EC pills should also change. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are currently reviewing available information, with WHO expected to make a formal recommendation in 2014.

What exactly do current data suggest about efficacy and weight?

The research indicates that levonorgestrel emergency contraception, such as Plan B One-Step® and its generic equivalents, are ineffective in women over 176 pounds, with efficacy beginning to decline at 165 pounds. The average weight of a woman in the United States is 166 pounds.

Will taking a higher dosage of EC pills increase efficacy in women who weigh over 176 pounds?

At this time, there are no data to indicate one way or the other whether increasing the dosage of EC pills will increase their efficacy in women over 176 pounds.

Are the new data on the declining efficacy of oral EC pills definitive enough to change clinical practice?

There have only been two analyses of data examining how a woman’s weight impact the efficacy of levonorgestrel EC like Plan B One-Step® and its generic equivalents. Some researchers and clinicians believe there is a need for more independent data on this relationship before an adjustment to clinical practice is warranted. Others believe that the existing data are important enough that women should be informed of their relative risk for pregnancy when using levonorgestrel products and have information on alternatives.

We encourage more studies on the efficacy of emergency contraception at various body weights and dosage levels. The FDA recently recommended that manufacturers start including women of a wider variety of weights, including women who are overweight or obese according to the measure of body mass index (BMI), so studies can better mirror the general population. Previously, manufacturers could exclude overweight and obese women from studies.

Do daily oral contraceptive pills also have varying efficacy depending on body mass or weight?

There is no evidence to suggest that the efficacy of daily oral birth control pills declines with increasing weight. However, some evidence suggests that the hormonal contraceptive patch may not work in women over a certain weight.
What should women do if they need EC and are over 176 pounds?

Women seeking emergency contraception who weigh over 176 pounds should consider using the ParaGard® copper intrauterine device (IUD) or ella® as their back-up birth control method. ella® appears to maintain efficacy at higher weights than levonorgestrel EC, though data suggest it may also lose efficacy past a certain weight. The efficacy of the ParaGard® IUD is not impacted by weight and is 99.9% effective at preventing pregnancy when inserted within five days of unprotected sex.

If a woman over 176 pounds cannot obtain one of these alternative methods, she may want to consider using Plan B One-Step®, which is available over-the-counter at an average price of $48. She may also want to consider one of its generic equivalents, available from the pharmacy counter at an average price of $41.

How can women obtain the ParaGard® copper IUD or ella®?

Unlike Plan B One-Step®, neither the copper IUD nor ella® are available over the counter. However, as part of the Affordable Care Act’s preventive services provision, all FDA-approved prescription contraceptive methods and related services are covered without cost-sharing, such as a co-pay or deductible. Insertion of a copper IUD requires at least one doctor’s visit. ella® is available at pharmacies, many community health centers, and conveniently, from http://www.ella-kwikmed.com for $40, including overnight shipping. Because ella® is a prescription-only drug, a Kwikmed physician will consult with women seeking ella® online and provide the necessary prescription.

Because time is of the essence when it comes to EC, women are encouraged to obtain it in advance and have it handy in case they need it. For assistance seeking insurance coverage of emergency contraception, contact the National Women’s Law Center hotline at 1-866-PILL-4-US or info@nwlc.org.