

Plan B available to women 18 and older in US

The US Food and Drug Administration has approved over-the-counter use of levonorgestrel (Plan B), the morning-after emergency contraception pill, to women who can prove they are 18 or older.

OTC sales of levonorgestrel, which has been available by prescription since 1999, are anticipated before the end of the year nationally. The 2-pill pack costs from US\$25 to \$40. Nine states, Alaska, California, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Washington and Vermont, already allow women of any age to buy levonorgestrel OTC from designated pharmacies.

According to the FDA approval announcement on Aug. 25, girls 17 and younger will still need a doctor's prescription (except in those states that specifically allow access at any age).

Levonorgestrel has been available OTC in Canada since April 2005 (*CMAJ* 2005;172[7]:86-7). Unlike Canada, US pharmacists will not provide counselling services when they sell the product.

The US approval caps a stormy 3-year debate in which medical organizations and women's rights groups argued that OTC status for levonorgestrel could cut the nation's annual 3 million unplanned pregnancies in half. Social conservative groups feared easier access for younger women would encourage promiscuity and increase sexually transmitted disease. Many also argued that imposing the 18-year-old limitation would be as ineffective as similar limitations on cigarettes and could be easily circumvented by 18 year olds buying the drugs for younger friends.

In applauding the FDA action, American Medical Association Board member Dr. Joseph M. Heyman said "Plan B meets all of the customary criteria for OTC availability. This classification of the drug will increase women's access to emergency contraception and can prevent unwanted pregnancies."

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) also approved the action but faulted FDA on limiting the drug's access to women 18 or older. In a statement, ACOG noted:

"By restricting its OTC availability to women age 18 and older, the FDA has missed an unparalleled opportunity to prevent teenage pregnancies. Each year there are more than 800 000 teen pregnancies in the US, with many ending in abortion. Pregnancy itself is not without risk, especially for a young woman."

Drug manufacturer Barr Pharmaceuticals notes that levonorgestrel should be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex, but that the sooner it is taken the more effective it will be. Barr says that if taken within 72 hours, levonorgestrel can reduce the risk of pregnancy by 89%. — Milan Korcok, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

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News @ a glance

Birth rates: Canada's crude birth rate declined to a record low in 2004, with just 10.5 live births for every 1000 people, according to Statistics Canada's annual projection. It marked the second straight decrease in the number of live births, from a 10.6 rate in 2003. The statistics also indicate a continuation of a long-term trend toward giving birth later in life; in 2003, the average woman was 29.6 years old, in 2004, the average was 29.7. Births to mothers aged 35 and older are now almost 4 times as frequent as they were a generation ago, accounting for 17.2% of births in 2004, as opposed to 4.6% a quarter century earlier.



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Head injuries: Although seatbelts and helmets appear to have helped reduce hospital admissions due to traumatic head injury over the last decade, particularly among youths, under age 19, and people over 60, people in these age groups remain at greatest risk of requiring head injury hospitalization because of falls, motor vehicle crashes or recreational mishaps, according to a new Canadian Institute for Health Information report (www.cihi.ca). Overall, 35% fewer Canadians were admitted to hospital for head injury in 2003–2004 (16 811), as compared to 25 665 in 1994–95. But Canadians under age 19 still account for 30% of all head injury hospitalizations, followed by 29% among those 60 and older. Falls (45%) are the leading cause of traumatic head injury, followed by motor vehicle incidents (36%), assault (9%), and sports and recreational activities (8%). Falls and sports activities cause more hospitalizations among youths and seniors, while motor vehicle crashes, assault and homicide play a greater role in hospitalizations among those aged 20–39.

Go North: The Yukon government is offering eligible new family physicians up to \$50 000 to practise in the territory. The Family Physician Incentive Program for New Graduates, part of the territory's \$12.7-million health human resources strategies, will give eligible candidates \$20 000 when they move, \$20 000 after two years and \$10 000 at the end of the fourth year.

Youth and tobacco: The number of youths (grades 5 through 9) trying tobacco products decreased by 50% between 1994 and 2004–05. Health Canada's 2004–05 *Youth Smoking Survey* reports that 21% of youths have experimented with these products (cigarettes, cigars or pipes, bidis, chewing tobacco and snuff). Cigarettes was the most common product tried (19%). Two percent reported being smokers, compared with 7% in 1994. In contrast, 63% of youths had tried alcohol, compared with 54% in 2002. — Compiled by Barbara Sibbald, *CMAJ*

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