

HSE advises that emergency hormonal contraception is available from pharmacists without a prescription up to five days after unprotected sex.

Dublin 12th November 2018.

The HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP) is launching a national public awareness campaign in partnership with the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) today.

The aim of the campaign is to increase public awareness that the emergency hormonal contraception (EHC) pill is available to women directly from a pharmacist up to five days (120 hours) following unprotected sex. The EHC pill can be used as an effective secondary method to prevent a crisis pregnancy when contraception has failed or has not been used.

Speaking ahead of the campaign launch, Minister for Health Simon Harris said, “It is vital for women to be aware that they can access the EHC pill directly from their community pharmacist without a prescription. Women with medical cards can also get the EHC pill free-of-charge directly from a pharmacist without the need for a prescription from their GP. This is an important public health measure and will remove any barrier to women getting timely treatment from their local pharmacy.”

In addition, the Minister has outlined his belief that contraception should be free. Work is underway in the Department of Health in this regard, which includes exploring all of the issues associated with enhancing access to contraception and removing the barrier of cost.

Helen Deely, Programme Lead of the HSE SHCPP, said, “There is a misconception that the EHC pill, commonly known as the ‘morning after pill’, can only be taken the morning after unprotected sex. We would encourage women to consult a pharmacist as soon as possible after an occasion of unprotected sex.”

Darragh O’Loughlin, IPU Secretary General, said, “Emergency contraception is time-sensitive. Its effectiveness diminishes between the time of unprotected sex and the time of taking it, making it crucial that all women are able to access it readily when necessary. The convenience and accessibility offered by community pharmacies is therefore hugely valuable in helping to prevent a crisis pregnancy. Pharmacists are fully qualified to offer advice to medical card holders on emergency contraception, as they have been safely providing emergency contraception, without prescription, to private patients since 2011.”

Ms Deely continues, “It is important to remember that the EHC pill is not a primary method of contraception and that it is available as a secondary method if needed. We encourage women to talk to their GPs about the best methods of contraception for them.”

While the EHC pill can prevent an unplanned pregnancy, it does not provide protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Using condoms correctly and every time sexual intercourse happens will significantly reduce the risk of getting an STI.

If you have had unprotected sex and are concerned that you may be exposed to or are at risk of contracting an STI, it is important to be tested. For more information on STI testing, please visit <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sexually-transmitted-infections/>

For more information about emergency contraception and contraception choices, please visit <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/contraception/>

ENDS

Notes to Editors

1. The Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP) is one of the policy programmes within the HSE. It is charged with the implementation of the National Sexual Health Strategy 2015-2020.
2. The three day EHC pill is available directly from a pharmacist and can be taken up to three days (72 hours) after unprotected sexual intercourse.
3. The five day EHC pill is available directly from a pharmacist and can be taken up to five days (120 hours).
4. Since 1 July 2017, medical card holders are able to get the EHC pill free from their pharmacy without a prescription; however, they will still be able to go to their GP for a prescription if they wish.
5. A HSE social media kit, including posts and images, have been provided to community pharmacies via the IPU website. Window stickers and posters that highlight the availability of the EHC pill have been made available to all IPU pharmacy members prior to today's campaign launch to complement the online messaging and to further raise awareness that the EHC pill is available at a pharmacy.