

That emergency pill may not be good for you

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In the past, it was rare for women to use contraception as a birth control method. According to the Uganda Demographic health survey of 2016, 39 per cent of married women use contraceptives and 51 per

cent of sexually active unmarried women also use contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Dr Richard Asaba, a general practitioner at Hoima Regional Referral Hospital, says a number of sexually active women use emergency pills they usually purchase from pharmacies without a doctor's pre-

scription. "...Since they are readily available, women use the pills every time they engage in unprotected sex," he says.

Dr Asaba notes that though the manufacturers of the emergency pills do not clearly state their long term implications, women should be mindful when taking them.

He says the practice is common in urban areas where they are easily accessible. "In urban areas, especially among students in institutions of higher learning, five out of 10 girls will attest to having used emergency pills," he says.

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Emergency pills: The hidden risks

Emergency contraception is a method of contraception used to prevent pregnancy after an act of unprotected sexual intercourse. As the name suggests, it is not meant for routine or repeated use.

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According to Dr Charles Kiggundu, the President of the Uganda Gynecologists Association, such widespread use of emergency contraception is alarming because most women using them are unaware of their mechanism of action and safety.

He says many women rash for contraceptive methods without finding out exactly how they will affect them in the long run.

Cycle disruption

Dr Kiggundu says emergency contraception such as Postinor 2, Gynomin and I-pill among others can change the length of your monthly menstrual cycle, making your next period come a week earlier or a week later than usual. Some women also find that the hormones in the pills cause unexpected bleeding, although it is not a common.

"Using the morning-after pill may delay your period by up to one week after you normally expect it. If you do not get your period within three to four weeks of taking the pill, take a pregnancy test," he advises.

Delay in getting pregnant

Elizabeth Nakyambade, a mother of two says she used emergency contraception on several occasions which made it difficult for her to get pregnant the time she wanted.

"While at university, out of fear of getting pregnant I would often buy these pills whenever I had unprotected sex. Because I hardly suffered any side effects, I thought my body was reacting well to them. However, when I married, it took me two years to finally get a baby. The doctors I consulted told me unlike normal contraceptive methods, emergency pills make it hard for one who frequently uses them to conceive when the time comes," she narrates.

But Christine Nankya (not real name) was not lucky like Nakyambade. She says she used the emergency pills on a number of occasions and ever since she stopped using them she has failed to conceive.

"I last used emergency pills in 2015 but since then I have been trying to get a child in vain. I have consulted health workers who have told me that my reproductive system is normal and I will conceive with time but it is taking long

and I am worried this might lead to problems in my marriage," she says.

"Although we all make mistakes, some are potentially life-changing. For example, instead of having unprotected sex when you are not ready for pregnancy, opt for contraception that does not put your life at risk such as condoms. Alternatively, you can abstain from sex until you find the right partner to marry," Dr Kiggundu advises.

SAFE METHODS

Condoms: Both regular and female condoms are the only form of birth control that will help protect against STIs and HIV. So even if you are using other birth control methods, it is important to use one to avoid infections.

IUD: An IUD (Intrauterine Device) is a small t-shaped device that is made out of flexible plastic. The t-shaped device is inserted into a woman's uterus to prevent pregnancy. It is an effective, long-term birth control method. However, if you ever do want to become pregnant, the IUD can easily be removed because they are not permanent.

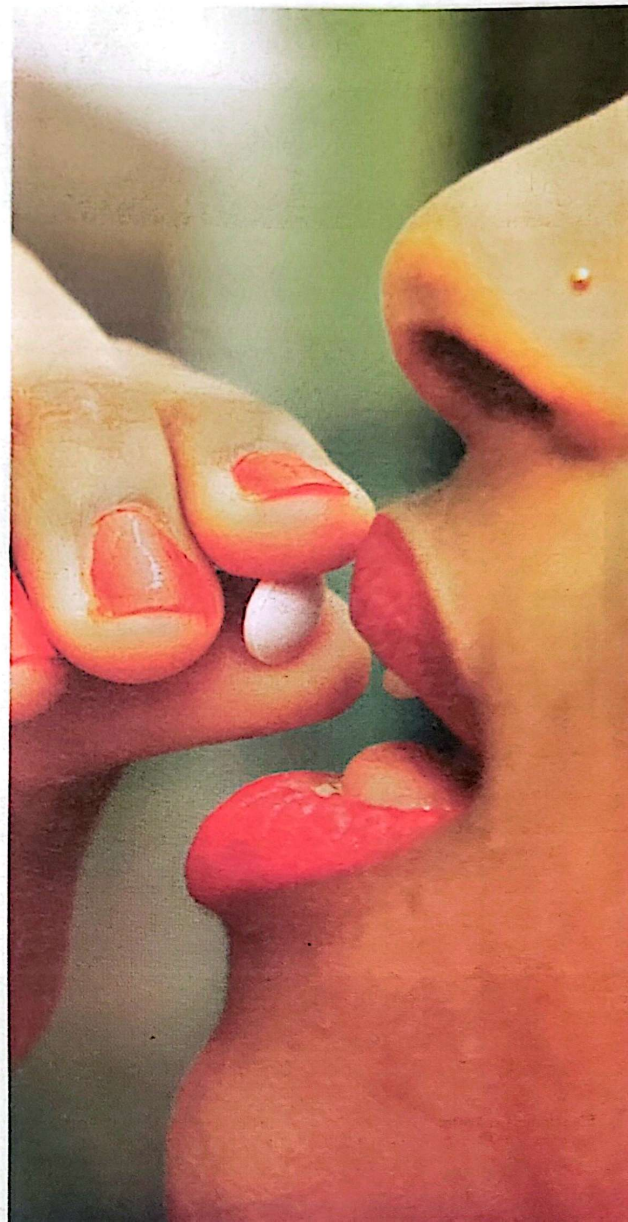
The patch: The patch is worn on the skin and changed only once a week for three weeks with a fourth week that is patch-free. It releases the same types of hormones as the birth control pill and is just as effective.

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PERCENTAGE OF UNMARRIED WOMEN WHO USE CONTRACEPTIVES TO AVOID UNWANTED PREGNANCIES.

Source: Uganda Demographic health survey of 2016



ADVICE

Dr Richard Asaba, a general practitioner at Hoima Regional Referral Hospital, says whereas emergency pills are the most sought after alternative for many sexually active young girls who want to avoid unplanned pregnancies, its usage should be minimal and if possible under clear prescription from a medical practitioner to avoid complications.

The pill will not protect you against sexually transmitted infections. If you are worried about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), please talk to your doctor or visit a clinic. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

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