

# Contraception failure - what remains to be done? Knowledge and attitudes regarding the use of emergency contraception among Austrian women and men during reproductive phase

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## ABSTRACT

### Aim of the study

To investigate the existing knowledge, use and attitudes towards emergency contraception (EC) are tested among Austrian women and men of reproductive age.

### Methods

In a cross-sectional study 247 women and 102 men ageing between 17 and 39 years ( $x=24.8 \pm 4.3$ ) were interviewed with the use of a structured questionnaire regarding their knowledge, previous use and attitudes on emergency contraception.

### Results

Nearly all respondents have heard of emergency contraception, while 100% of the female respondents and 93.1% of the male respondents know the recommended time of EC. Despite of these extremely high values, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the availability of EC in Austria and highly frequent misconceptions about EC. Only the 30 % of the participants in the study plead for a prescription free availability of EC as over the counter product in Austria.

### Conclusions

There is still an information gap about EC in Austria, although EC is available after prescription in Austria since 2000.

**Keywords:** emergency contraception, use, knowledge, contraception, over the counter drugs, non-prescription drugs

## INTRODUCTION

Effective hormonal methods for preventing pregnancy after unprotected intercourse are known since the early seventies of the twentieth century. In 1974 Yuzpe et al published a pilot study in which the effectiveness of the application of two doses of ethinylestradiol and levonorgestrel within 72 hours after the unprotected intercourse was described.<sup>1</sup> Today emer-

gency contraception (EC) is available in many countries and represents an important contraceptive option because it is the only form of hormonal contraception that can reduce the risk of pregnancy after unprotected intercourse or when a planned contraceptive method fails.<sup>2,3</sup> However, emergency contraceptives remain relatively unknown and are discussed controversially in many countries.<sup>4-10</sup> Several factors are thought to contribute to the low awareness and restricted utilization of EC, including a lack of knowledge and the requirement for a prescription.<sup>11-13</sup> In several countries such as Sweden, France, Norway, Portugal, South Africa and the United Kingdom, EC has been reclassified to a non-prescription drug and is available as an over the counter product.<sup>14</sup>

In Austria emergency contraception, also called "morning after pills" is available since 2000, a prescription of a physician or an outpatient department of a hospital is still required. In 2005, the Austrian Ministry for Health permitted pharmacists to sell EC over-the-counter in cases that it would be impossible for women to get a prescription in time, such as during weekends or night hours. The supporters of the reclassification of emergency contraceptives to non-prescription drugs are not satisfied with this change. They still claim that emergency contraceptives should be available over-the-counter for all women every time. But what do Austrian women and men of reproductive age think and know about EC?

The main purpose of this study was to assess the knowledge about EC and attitudes about using EC among Austrian women and men of reproductive age.

## METHODS

### Subjects

In total 349 subjects ranging in age between 17 and 39 years ( $x=24.8 \pm 4.3$ ) were enrolled in the present study. The sample comprised 247 female participants ageing between 17 and 39 years ( $x=24.1 \pm 3.9$ ) and 102 male participants ageing between 19 and 39 years ( $x=26.4 \pm 4.7$ ). The recruitment of the study participants took place at the University of Vienna and via the snowball system. All participants originated from Austria. The majority of them were unmarried (more than 90%) and childless (about 90%). Nearly the 80% of the respondents were University students or had already completed their studies.

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