New Report Reveals Full Access to Emergency Contraception Still Not a Reality

American Society for Emergency Contraception Calls on Pharmacies to Follow FDA Guidelines and Make EC Accessible for All

Princeton, NJ (January 22, 2018) – The American Society for Emergency Contraception (ASEC) today released new findings that show while levonorgestrel emergency contraception (sold as Plan B One-Step and generic forms, including Aftera and My Way) is approved for over-the-counter (OTC) sale, true OTC access is not a reality for many women.

Emergency contraception (EC) is a contraceptive method that can be used to prevent pregnancy after sex. Levonorgestrel EC contains a higher dose of progestin hormones found in regular birth control pills.

In its third survey since 2014, ASEC members visited retail pharmacies around the country to determine whether EC was stocked on store shelves as allowed by FDA regulations, how much it cost, and whether pharmacy staff were imposing age restrictions, which were removed by the FDA 4 years ago.

ASEC found that in 40% of stores, EC is not stocked on the shelf. Independent pharmacies were far more likely than chain stores (91% vs 24%) to keep EC behind the counter, rather than stock it on the shelf. A full 30% of stores continue to impose burdensome age restriction and ID requirement on the sale of EC, despite FDA removal of those barriers 4 years ago. Independent pharmacies were more likely to impose an age restriction than chain pharmacies. The full report can be found here: Not There Yet: ASEC’s 2017 EC Access Study.

ASEC Executive Director Kelly Cleland stated, “EC is more effective the sooner it’s taken, so any barriers mean a greater risk of pregnancy. People who need EC may be intimidated or embarrassed to discuss their purchase with pharmacy staff. There’s no medical reason for EC to sit behind the counter – where it remains out of reach many who need it.”

Price is an additional barrier for many; the report found the average price for the branded product, Plan B One-Step, was about $49, and generic products were around $39. Cleland said, “The high price of EC puts it out of reach for many women, for whom $40 or $50 is a significant expense. Women who are young, poor, or living in rural areas are among the hardest hit.”

“The FDA determined years ago that levonorgestrel EC is safe enough for full OTC access,” Cleland continued. “The time has come for all pharmacies to do the right thing and stock EC on the shelf, where it belongs. ASEC is calling on all pharmacies, whether they are independent or part of a chain, to stock
EC on the shelf and eliminate unnecessary ID checks since there is no longer an age restriction on the sale of EC.”

ASEC produces an EC Guide for Pharmacies and Retailers, which clearly describes the current regulations around the sale of EC, and encourages customers to bring it to the pharmacy to educate staff if outdated guidelines are being imposed. ASEC encourages pharmacies to develop clear policies and guidelines about EC and communicate them to all staff.

“It has been four years since EC was first approved for OTC sale, yet major barriers to accessing EC remain,” said Cleland. “It’s time for real-world access to catch up with regulations. At a time when reproductive healthcare in our country is under fire, making EC truly accessible is more important than ever.”

The American Society for Emergency Contraception works to promote information about and access to emergency contraception in the United States. For more information, visit www.americansocietyforec.org.