What are Emergency Contraception Pills?
Emergency contraceptive pills are available to use in case of contraceptive failure (condom tearing or slipping off, missed dosages of oral contraceptive pills), sexual assault, or failure to use contraception. Emergency Contraceptive pills (ECPs) contain hormones which may inhibit or delay ovulation, or possibly alter the lining of the uterus to prevent implantation. The effectiveness of ECPs in preventing pregnancy is over 90%. Studies have shown that ECPs can be effective up to 5 days (120 hours) following intercourse, although for maximum effectiveness they should be taken as soon as possible. This is usually the next day if intercourse is in the evening/night.

There are several different brands available. Levonorgestrel (for example: Next Choice, Plan B), is available without a prescription. Another brand, Ulipristal (Ella) is only available by prescription. It may be slightly more effective than Plan B if more than 3 days have passed since unprotected intercourse occurred. It also may be suggested for women over 165 pounds. Speak to a provider, if available, to see if this would be a better option for you. However, if you are not able to speak to a provider, Plan B is available at most pharmacies and at a lower cost. It is recommended that women on hormonal contraception (oral contraception, patches or nuvaring) who use Ulipristal, use condoms for 14 days or until menstruation occurs, due to concern that it may temporarily reduce the effectiveness of hormonal contraceptives.

Side Effects of ECPs
Plan B is generally well tolerated. Side effects are not common, but nausea, abdominal pain, fatigue, mild headache, dizziness, diarrhea, and vomiting have been reported. In the unlikely event that vomiting occurs within one hour of taking the ECP, call Health Services as you may need to take additional pills to make up for those lost to vomiting. Call Health Services if you are experiencing any severe side effects.

After You Take ECPs
Your next menstrual period should begin sometime within 2 to 3 weeks after taking ECPs. It may be earlier or later than usual and the flow may be heavier, lighter, or more spotty than usual. If your period doesn’t start within 3 weeks, see your medical provider to rule out pregnancy. Although use of ECPs reduces the risk of pregnancy substantially, it is still less effective than consistent use of other contraceptive methods and is intended specifically for emergency use. After you have taken ECPs, get started on an ongoing method of birth control. In addition, consider being evaluated for sexually transmitted diseases, if there is a possibility that unprotected sex puts you at risk. ECPs do not prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

ECPs do not prevent ectopic pregnancies (implantation outside the uterus). This is a medical emergency. Seek medical attention immediately if you have severe pain on one or both sides of the lower abdomen, often associated with feeling faint.