

Morning-After Pill Trapped Behind the Counter: Women's Experience

Women all over the country have been fighting the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) for years to get full over-the-counter access to the Morning-After Pill (also known as *Plan B* or Emergency Contraception.)

All our hard work cracked their defenses! In August of 2006 the FDA eased the restrictions by announcing that the Morning-After Pill will be available at pharmacies without prescription to women 18 and over.

BUT THE BATTLE ISN'T OVER

The FDA wants us to believe all is said and done, but their decision places the Morning-After Pill behind the counter, requiring ALL women to show ID to get it. In addition, it will only be available from a pharmacist, during pharmacy hours, not at the convenience store down the street, 24/7. The restrictions are therefore harmful to young women *and* adult women.

Although this new status is a real improvement, the restrictions are still causing women unnecessary delays and hassles.

Here are some of our experiences.

1. "After going to a Wal-Mart and an Albertson's, both 24-hour stores with closed pharmacies, I found a Walgreen's where the pharmacy was open. I asked the pharmacist if they had Plan B. She said yes and went to get a pack before I could say I wanted more than one. When she came back with one pack I said, "Can I get 4 please?" She seemed flustered and asked me what kind of birth control I used, and I said condoms. (There were two men waiting for prescriptions, definitely in earshot). She got 4 packs and when she came back, asked why I wanted so many. I said to have on hand in case I need them. At that point I said, "Why are you asking?" She said there are restrictions, which is why she asked me for my ID. I said it was hard to find an open pharmacy so that's why I wanted 4, plus I might want to give them to friends. She said, "You can't give them to friends, that would be like giving tobacco to someone under 17." I said, "What if the friends are over 17?" She said, "That's still not good because we'd want to talk to them about what kind of birth control they use, their birth control options, make sure they're using something to prevent STDs...you for example said you're using condoms so that's OK, I understand that they break." Then I said, "But it's over-the-counter." She said, "Yes but we still want to talk to people about birth control options."
2. "I had a very good experience buying it. It was pretty obvious that I was buying it for my younger sister and the clerk (a middle aged woman) was totally cool about it and even rolled her eyes that she had to check for my ID at all...she said 'It's not like you're buying alcohol or something dangerous.'"
3. "I went to the pharmacist here in New York City and asked to buy the Morning-After Pill and it was \$45. I went to a pharmacist in France and asked for it and it was \$10. When I told her that it was almost \$50 in the U.S., she was totally shocked. She pointed out that the \$10 package they sold in France were from an American company. And she actually encouraged me to buy 10 packets and bring them home for my friends and myself. I didn't have enough euros left to do it. But funnily enough, the very first message I received when I got off the plane in the U.S. was from my friend asking if I had a stockpile of Plan B and if she could have one because they were so damn expensive."

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4. "I needed the morning-after pill on a Saturday because of a slipped condom. I sent my boyfriend to get it at the pharmacy. He said that the pharmacist assistant smirked at him when he said he wanted to buy Plan B. Then the pharmacist said, "I can't sell that to you, you could be giving it to a 13 year old for all I know." When my boyfriend protested, the pharmacist made some calls. After a long while, he conceded that he could sell it to him. Luckily my boyfriend knew he had the right to buy it, but it was definitely not great to have to argue about it in the middle of a drug store line. It was also very expensive—Eckerd sold it for \$37 so we got it there. CVS sold it for \$44."

5. "When my partner and I needed the morning-after pill in the middle of the night, I sent my him to one of the only 24 hour pharmacies in the city. The pharmacist refused to give it to him because he said I needed to be there to show my ID and prove that I was over 18. My partner knew his rights and argued with the pharmacist. Unfortunately the pharmacist forced my partner to take the subway home, get my ID, and then return to the pharmacy to purchase the pill. Riding the subway back and forth in the middle of the night was extremely burdensome. After sending a letter of complaint I received an apology from the pharmacy that the individual pharmacist did not understand the rules."

While progress has been made, their stories point to many reasons why these new rules are not a full victory:

- The age restriction does not protect young women; instead, it puts teenagers at risk for unplanned pregnancy.
- The rules are confusing- many pharmacists are refusing to sell Plan to men who want to purchase it for their partners, even though they are allowed to do so as long as they are 18.
- The fact that 24-hour stores have limited pharmacy hours creates an impediment for women, since the Morning-After Pill decreases in effectiveness as time elapses. If Plan B were truly over-the-counter, you could get it off the shelf at any gas station or grocery store.
- Putting the Morning-After Pill behind the counter allows pharmacists to ask inappropriate questions, such as personal information about a customer's birth control choices, regardless of others in earshot.
- At \$40-\$50, Plan B is extremely expensive. Why does it cost \$10 in France, but \$50 here?