

## Women's Health Care Providers' Experiences with Emergency Contraception

### Introduction

For decades, health care providers have known that certain types of oral contraceptives when prescribed in a short strong course shortly *after* unprotected sex reduce the chances of pregnancy by as much as 75 percent (or higher, up to 88 percent, for progestin-only pills). This back up birth control method has become commonly known as "emergency contraception." It is not intended for use as a regular method of contraception. Unlike medical abortion drugs, such as mifepristone (RU-486) or methotrexate, emergency contraception prevents a pregnancy from occurring as opposed to terminating an established pregnancy.

In 1997, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) declared the use of oral contraceptives as emergency contraceptive pills (or ECPs) to be a "safe" and "effective" means of preventing an unwanted pregnancy. At the time, virtually all ob/gyns and family practice physicians reported that they considered ECPs to be both "safe" and "effective" and supported their use to protect against unintended pregnancy. Yet few physicians were routinely discussing this option with patients, and even less had prescribed more than a handful of times in recent years.

Prior to the approval two years ago by the FDA of the a dedicated emergency contraceptive product, the only option available to physicians interested in offering ECPs to patients was to prescribe oral contraceptives "off-label" (a common practice with FDA-approved drugs). Today, there are two dedicated emergency contraceptive products available in the U.S.: Preven, a combined estrogen and progestin pill, approved in 1998, and Plan B, a progestin-only "mini-pill," approved in 1999. Both of these products, like oral contraceptives used regularly or as ECPs, require a prescription.

The findings reported on in this survey snapshot reflect the experiences of physicians with emergency contraception in 2000, and, where possible, compare with data collected in 1997 and 1995.

### Summary of Findings

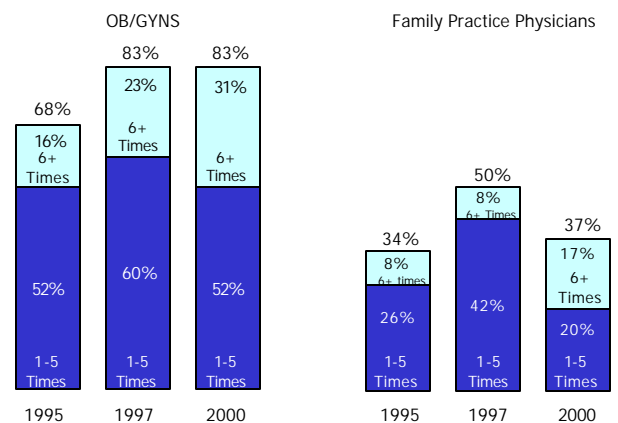
According to a nationally representative survey of more than 760 women's health care providers conducted in early 2000, nine in ten ob/gyns, and half of family practice physicians, have *ever* prescribed emergency contraception. Within the most recent year, 83 percent of ob/gyns, and just over a third of family practice physicians (37%), prescribed emergency contraception for their patients.

The *overall* percent of ob/gyns who prescribed emergency contraception in the year prior holds constant when comparing results in 2000 with those collected in 1997; among family practice physicians the *overall* percent who prescribed in the last year declined during the same period. However, the survey finds that physicians who are prescribing emergency contraception are doing so somewhat more often than in previous years. Nearly a third of ob/gyns (31%) prescribed emergency contraception *six or more times* in the last year, up from 23 percent in 1997 and 16 percent in 1995; among family practice physicians there is also an increase in the percent who prescribed *six or more times* in the last year—17 percent in 2000, up from 8 percent in 1997 and 1995. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1

### PRESCRIBING PRACTICES

The Percent of Providers Who Prescribed Emergency Contraception in the Year Prior...



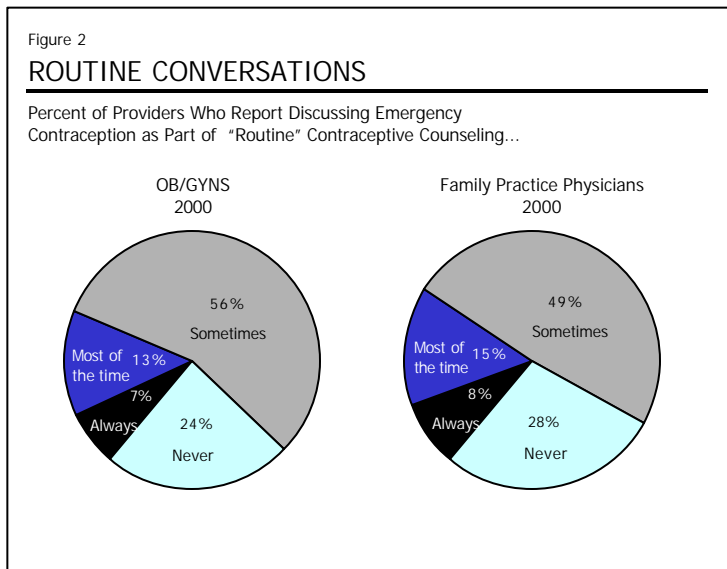
This increase in prescriptions appears to be, at least to some extent, the result of greater public interest. Twenty nine percent of ob/gyns and 17 percent of family practice physicians report that interest in emergency contraception among their patients has gone up over the last year. (As of 1997, the most recent year for which data are available and a year before the first dedicated ECP product came on to the market, approximately one percent of women of reproductive age (18-44) had ever used emergency contraception.<sup>1</sup>)

While providers are still not routinely discussing emergency contraception with their patients—just 20 percent of ob/gyns and 23 percent of family practice physicians say they talk about this back up method “most” or “all of the time” as part of routine contraceptive counseling (See Figure 2)—they are having *more* conversations than in previous years. The last time physicians were surveyed in 1997, half as many—just 10 percent of ob/gyns and 9 percent of family practice physicians—were discussing emergency contraception “most” or “all of the time.”

## Methodology

The questions and results on this document are from the Kaiser Family Foundation's *Third National Survey of Women's Health Care Providers on Reproductive Health*, a national random-sample survey of 767 physicians, including 566 obstetrician/gynecologists (OB/GYNs) and 201 family practice physicians (FPPs). The survey was previously conducted in 1995 and 1997. The questionnaire used for this most recent survey was designed by staff at the Kaiser Family Foundation and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA). Interviews were conducted by telephone by PSRA between January 19 and April 27, 2000. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percent for OB/GYNs and plus or minus 10 percent for FPPs.

Tracking data is available for some questions in this survey; not all questions were asked in previous years. The data reported on here represents only a portion of the complete survey, which examines physicians' attitudes and experiences with regard to a range of reproductive health issues, including medical abortion (mifepristone and methotrexate), emergency contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. These findings are reported on separately in other reports and summaries prepared by the Foundation.



Today, 23 percent of ob/gyns and 28 percent of family practice physicians report *never* talking about emergency contraception as part of routine contraceptive counseling, down from 46 percent and 62 percent, respectively, in 1997 when providers were last surveyed.

Additional copies of this document as well as the actual question wording and topline data are available at [www.kff.org/repro](http://www.kff.org/repro) or by calling the Foundation's publication request line at 1-800-656-4533 (ask for #3085). The previously conducted surveys may also be accessed on the Foundation's website.

<sup>1</sup>National Surveys of Americans and Health Care Providers on Emergency Contraception, 1997, Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997.