



Emergency contraception on Illinois college campuses

July 2023

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Emergency contraception and reproductive autonomy

Emergency contraception provides people with a time-sensitive option for preventing a pregnancy after unprotected sex, contraceptive failure, and sexual assault. With the increasing restrictions on abortion in the United States, access to emergency contraception has become even more important.¹ While forms of emergency contraception are now available over the counter at pharmacies, it can still be challenging to obtain. Individuals in need of emergency contraception can experience multiple barriers, such as cost, time delays, lack of information, travel, and trauma.¹ Access can be particularly difficult for young people and those belonging to low-income, sexual minority, and BIPOC communities²—the same communities most often directly impacted by restrictive reproductive health policies shaped by sexism, racism, and gender-based violence. Considering that emergency contraception is more effective the sooner it is taken following unprotected sex, it is critical to remove any barriers to access.

Ensuring that young people can determine when and if they become pregnant has important implications for their reproductive autonomy and health. In particular, college students worry about the risk of pregnancy, believing that it would hinder their educational and career goals.³ At the same time, recent data suggests that contraception use among women who were sexually active and not seeking pregnancy was lowest among 15-24-year-olds (83%).⁴ Emergency contraception can be especially useful for this age group. Use of emergency contraception pills has increased over the years and younger women are more likely to report use of emergency contraception; research suggests that more than one third of women ages 15-24 (34%) have taken emergency contraception pills.⁵ Given the increased need and demand among young people, making emergency contraception easily accessible should be a priority.

Emergency contraception vending machines improve access

Offering emergency contraception in vending machines on college campuses facilitates convenient access for students, giving them a chance to avert pregnancy if desired. These vending machines can be equipped with emergency contraceptive pills such as levonorgestrel, also known as the morning-after pill or Plan B, as well as other over-the-counter contraceptive and sexual health products. Vending machines can provide access to emergency contraception when student health centers and pharmacies are closed, increasing the likelihood that an individual in need will obtain emergency contraception in the time-sensitive period of up to five days following unprotected sex. Additionally, emergency contraception sold through vending machines costs far less than in pharmacies for those paying out of pocket (\$11-20 versus \$40-50). These vending machines are also often located in private spaces, offering a confidential option for students to obtain emergency contraception. Finally, for students who experience sexual assault, access to emergency contraception as soon as possible without interference and stigma is crucial. Overall, vending machines can provide young people with a timely, low-cost, and confidential way of obtaining vital sexual health resources that support their reproductive autonomy and well-being.

Currently, 49 states plus the District of Columbia allow the sale of over-the-counter medication, including emergency contraception, in vending machines. Connecticut, the only state that prohibits it, recently passed a bill that would allow non-prescription vending machines.⁶ There are also currently emergency contraception vending machines on at least 39 college campuses across the country and existing resources to help campuses with implementation.⁷ While there are no



restrictions on the sale of over-the-counter medication in vending machines in Illinois, there are currently no vending machines with emergency contraception on college campuses in the state. However, in May 2023, the Illinois Public Higher Education Act (SB 1907) passed both houses and was sent to the governor the following month.

Emergency contraception now required at Illinois public colleges & universities

The new law (SB1907) requires every public institution of higher education in the state to provide emergency contraception for sale in at least one vending machine on campus.⁸ The law also establishes standards concerning the packaging, storage, cost, and distribution of the emergency contraception. The law refers to the vending machines as “wellness kiosks”, which are defined as “a mechanical device used for retail sales of wellness products that may include, but is not limited to, prophylactics, menstrual cups, tampons, menstrual pads, pregnancy tests, and nonprescription drugs.” The law also requires that a wellness kiosk include “discounted” emergency contraception. Products available in the wellness kiosks must be sold in clearly labeled, original, unbroken, tamper-proof, and expiration-dating packaging, must not be expired, and must be stored per manufacturer recommendations. The law calls for at least one wellness kiosk on the campus of each public institution of higher education in Illinois, including community colleges. Wellness kiosks must be available for students during weekends and after class hours, except for community colleges where wellness kiosks must be available during class hours. Additionally, wellness kiosks must display information about the owner of the machine, a toll-free contact number, and consumer reminder to check the expiration date of available products.

Through the sale of emergency contraception in vending machines on college campuses, students can assert autonomy over their sexual and reproductive health. These vending machines address the hurdles individuals seeking emergency contraception often face by providing a timely, low-cost, and private option to obtain the medication. Private colleges and other spaces where youth may need access to emergency contraception should also consider offering vending machine access.

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