

## **A Request for Improving Access to Emergency Contraceptive Pill in Light of the Impact of COVID-19**

### Citizen's Initiative for Pharmaceutical Access To Emergency Contraception

Violence against women and children is rapidly increasing worldwide due to quarantine measures put in place to reduce spread of COVID-19, and it has been reported that the number of people experiencing anxiety of unintended pregnancy is increasing, especially among young people, in Japan. The emergency contraceptive pill ("morning after pill", EC) is a medicine that prevents pregnancy after sexual intercourse without contraception or sexual intercourse without proper contraception, including in situations of sexual violence. It should be taken as soon as possible, and within 72 hours of sexual intercourse. Contraception and family planning are essential to the health care of women and are important in any situation. Also, preventing unintended pregnancies can lead to fewer deaths by child abuse. We are requesting the following to protect the health of women and children amid ongoing uncertainties due to COVID-19:

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1. To promote an environment where EC is used properly and safely
  2. To improve, strengthen, and inform the system for providing face-to-face and online medical care for emergency contraceptives
  3. To resume the discussion regarding switching EC into OTC (over-the-counter) medicine immediately, reflecting the voice of the public
  4. To make emergency contraceptives available without prescription at pharmacies, with the involvement of a pharmacist
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These requests are explored in more detail below.

### **1. To promote an environment where EC is used properly and safely**

EC is a last resort and cannot prevent pregnancy perfectly. It is crucial to provide appropriate aftercare when needed, support women's choices by giving information about daily contraception, sexually transmitted infection testing, or cervical cancer

screening, and nurture proper understanding of sex and sexuality through education. Also, in Japan, because EC is expensive, there are problems such as financial barriers to taking EC, or the buying and selling EC whose safety cannot be ensured through SNS.

Emphasizing women's physical, mental, and social health, we demand a promoting an environment where EC is provided for affordable prices\* in multiple means to all women at risk of unintentional pregnancy and used properly and safely.

\*Emergency contraceptives are designated by the WHO as an “Essential Medicine (essential for the health of the majority of the population and should be offered at an affordable price to everyone)”.

## **2. To improve, strengthen, and inform the system for providing face-to-face and online medical care for emergency contraceptives**

EC is a ‘prescription-needed medicine’, meaning that face-to-face consultation with a doctor (regardless of the department) has been a requirement for women to receive EC. Additionally, in July 2019, the ‘Guideline for the Proper Implementation of Telemedicine’ was revised to allow telemedicine for EC with certain requirements being met. From April 2020, a special and time-limited treatment has been implemented due to COVID-19, and it is now possible to have a consultation with a doctor for obtaining EC by phone or video call, even when the original requirements are not met. Currently, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare provides online training for medical doctors on prescribing EC through telemedicine. On the other hand, training for pharmacists has been available only offline, so that they have been postponed in many regions. Also, the list of trained medical doctors and pharmacists has not been published or made available for the public.

We urgently request to improve and strengthen the system for providing EC, including establishment of an environment where pharmacists nationwide can take part in training, and disseminate information from people in medical care to the general public.

## **3. To resume the discussion regarding switching EC into OTC (Over-the-counter) medicine immediately, reflecting the voice of the public.**

Although the majority of the public comments supported accessibility to EC at a pharmacy, it was denied at the Evaluation and Review Conference on Conversion of Medicine from Medical Use to Guidance/General Use in 2017. Despite this, the Minister of Health and Welfare stated that “We cannot avoid discussing OTC again” in 2018. On 18th May 2020, the Council for Regulatory Reform Promotion of the Cabinet Office published “Opinions for Expanding OTC Drug (Switch OTC) Options (draft)” and announced: “medicines that have been converted to OTC in many other countries such as emergency contraceptives are not approved in Japan”.

The WHO (World Health Organization) is advising all over the world to “Ensure access to emergency post-coital contraception, including consideration of over the counter provision” during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We demand to resume the discussion regarding switching EC into OTC (Over-the-counter) medicine immediately. In addition, to reflect voices from the public, the committee members should include not only specialists like pharmacists or medical doctors but also representatives of civil groups and women who understand the background and situations of women who are in need of EC, and act to represent this group.

#### **4. To make emergency contraceptives available without a prescription at pharmacies with the involvement of a pharmacist**

EC has been established as a safe drug without serious side effects, meaning that it does not need to be under strict medical control. Therefore, in 19 countries, EC is directly available at pharmacies, and 76 countries let people buy EC at pharmacies with consultation and explanations by pharmacists. On the other hand, in Japan, it is necessary to have a doctor's medical consultation and a prescription through face-to-face consultation or telemedicine, and it costs about from 6,000 yen to 20,000 yen (60-200USD). We hear statements like: "I gave up taking EC because of psychological barriers to medical consultation and cost.", " the procedure took too long and I could not take EC within 72 hours of sexual intercourse; I got pregnant,", "I could not use telemedicine because it requires credit card payment and I didn't have a card."

To ensure that all women at risk of unintended pregnancy can access EC, besides strengthening the provision of medical consultation, we demand to create an environment where women can get EC properly and with a sense of security at pharmacies: without a prescription and with the involvement of a pharmacist.

\*1) BPC: Behind The Pharmacy Counter \*2) OTC: Over The Counter

For G7 (7 major countries) excluding Japan, EC can be purchased at pharmacies through BPC in Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and OTC in the US, Canada and France. It costs from 8-40 USD.

**[Supporting organizations (in alphabetical order)]**

<General Incorporated Association>

Chabudai Gaeshi Jyoshi Action

Japan Family Planning Association (JFPA)

JLIPA

Kanagawaken Women's Pharmaceutical Association

Little Women Project

Professional Women's Coalition for Sexuality and Health

Spring

<Public Interest incorporated foundation>

Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning (JOICFP)

<Approved Nonprofit Organization>

Empowerment Kanagawa

Florence

Katariba

Masorebonita

Single Mothers Forum

<Nonprofit Organization>

All Japan Women's Shelter Network

BOND Project

Child First Japan

Lighthouse: Center for Human Trafficking Victims

National Network for Domestic Violence prevention

Piccolare

Pilcon

Sexual Assault Relief Center Tokyo (SARC Tokyo)

Shiawasenamida

Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan, Women's Project  
Women's Clinic Network

<Others>

#Nandenaino Project

**[Inquiries]**

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**[Reference Material]**

WHO `Contraception/Family planning and COVID-19"

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/qa-detail/contraception-family-planning-and-covid-19?fbclid=IwAR1poiAktBdEi-l6YZ>

HQ2j3dYnlu4nICpfoh967Cmn5\_ziFXPjWxs3XsGGI

WHO ``Emergency Contraception"

[https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/International  
Conception ://www.cecinfo.org/](https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/International-Conception)

Regulatory Reform Promotion Council "Opinion (draft) for expanding OTC drug (switch OTC) options"[https://www8.cao.go.jp/kisei-kaikaku/kisei/  
publication/opinion/200518honkaigi01.pdf](https://www8.cao.go.jp/kisei-kaikaku/kisei/publication/opinion/200518honkaigi01.pdf)