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New Research Highlights Need for Improved Access to ella® Emergency Contraception at California Pharmacies

Ella emergency contraception is more effective for people at higher weights and for a longer period of time after unprotected sex than Plan B, yet community pharmacists in California offer ella much less frequently.

Only one in five community pharmacists in California works at a pharmacy that provides ella emergency contraception without an outside provider's prescription, according to a new study from the Center on Reproductive Health, Law, and Policy at UCLA Law. The study also found that one in four Californians assigned female at birth weighs between 155-187 lbs., the weight range in which ella is more effective than Plan B.

The report draws on data from a 2022 survey of California pharmacists and the 2020 California Health Interview Survey and emphasizes the urgent need for action to ensure equitable access to effective emergency contraception in the face of increasing bans and restrictions on abortion rights.

Results show that, while pharmacists at pharmacies that furnish hormonal contraception were over four times as likely to report pharmacy provision of ella compared to those at pharmacies that do not prescribe hormonal contraception, pharmacist-prescribed provision of ella still lags far behind pharmacist-prescribed hormonal contraception. Findings indicate that only 36% of pharmacists in the sample who reported prescribing hormonal contraception did the same for ella emergency contraception.

"These study's findings show there is an urgent need to eliminate unnecessary barriers to ella, a highly effective and safe method of emergency contraception," said study author Jaclyn Serpico, Post-Graduate Law Fellow at the Center on Reproductive Health, Law, and Policy at UCLA Law. "One obvious solution is to make ella, like Plan B, available over the counter at pharmacies, which would require change at the national level. In the meantime, here in California we must increase pharmacist and patient knowledge on the existence of ella and pharmacist's power to prescribe it themselves, and ensure that pharmacies are stocking ella and not just Plan B. Doing so could go a long way towards ensuring everyone has access to the emergency contraception method that is best for them, a key tenant of expanding reproductive justice."

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The Center on Reproductive Health, Law, and Policy at UCLA Law is a think tank and interdisciplinary research center created to meet the current national crisis in access to abortion while working towards long-term solutions to advance reproductive justice.