

## **Like Chocolate: Adolescent Emergency Contraception Use in Nairobi**

In 2004, the Kenyan media featured a set of reports alleging that an epidemic of emergency contraception (EC) abuse had emerged among adolescents in Nairobi. Fueling an already heated debate on reproductive rights in Kenya, both a newspaper article and a television news story suggested that open access to EC encouraged risky sexual behaviors among adolescents. The features implied that although educated adolescents have adequate knowledge of the modes of HIV transmission, easy access to EC has encouraged frequent and risky sexual encounters. According to the newspaper, young women in Nairobi were so regularly and repeatedly engaging in this risky behavior that they were “using [EC pills] like chocolate.”

Although these stories were based on anecdotal evidence, they have nonetheless had an impact on the national policy debate. Despite the Ministry of Health’s decision to integrate EC into the public sector contraceptive method mix, officials remain wary of a popular backlash because of its increasingly controversial nature. Not only has EC been tenuously linked to risky sexual behavior, but both locally and globally, it has also been incorrectly associated with abortion.

Current research provides little empirical grounding for this debate. While one study in Mexico found that correct knowledge of EC among adolescents was correlated with condom usage, it could not show a clear causal pathway between EC knowledge and safer sexual practices.<sup>i</sup> Another study in the United States, found that advanced provision of EC to adolescents was not associated with a higher incidence of unprotected sex or less regular contraceptive usage. They also reported that adolescents with advanced provision had higher reported condom usage in the last month than those without advanced provision of EC.<sup>ii</sup> Conversely, research undertaken in the United Kingdom suggests that EC use among women of all ages may actually lead to an increase in risky behaviors and use of EC as a regular method. While there is some question about the generalizability of these findings, largely because of the unique qualities of the sample population, this study highlights important questions regarding the influence of EC on sexual risk-taking.<sup>iii</sup>

To contribute both to this emerging literature, and inform the policy debate in Kenya, in July 2005 the Population Council undertook a rapid diagnostic assessment of EC use among adolescents in Nairobi. Data from this assessment will help determine the extent of EC use among the target population and provide initial insights into the relationship between access to EC and sexual risk-taking.

### ***Methodology***

As a rapid, diagnostic assessment of EC use and behavior in Nairobi, data collection and analysis took place over a two-month period, and focused on adolescent girls in Nairobi.

To ensure that findings are directly relevant to the current public debate on EC, efforts were made to collect information from the same type of respondents cited in the media reports: namely young women in Nairobi between the ages of 14 and 25. Respondents were drawn from two selected secondary schools and a local university, in response to allegations that these populations were most likely to 'abuse' EC. To establish a more comprehensive picture of EC use and minimize selection bias, a limited number of out-of-school youth were surveyed. The convenient sample of 300 was drawn from the following three groups:

- Ages 14-18: Girls' Secondary Schools (50 participants per school)
- Ages 18-25: University (100 participants)
- Ages 14-25: Out of School Youth (100 participants)

To ensure diversity, geographic and economic criteria were employed to select the secondary schools in Nairobi. University participants were selected from the general female student population available around the library and other common areas. Out-of-school youth were targeted through two organizations that work with young people in slum areas in Nairobi.

The quantitative survey instrument covered a range of topics designed to assess EC knowledge and use as it relates to sexual behavior. Prior contraceptive knowledge and use were measured along with participation in risky sexual behavior such as having sex for money and having sex without a condom. A series of questions investigated use of EC based upon the participant's knowledge of their own use and their close friends' behaviors. Repeat EC use in a single month and the past three months were assessed. Finally, participants ranked their own susceptibility to both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

### ***Expected Findings***

The primary objective of this assessment is to provide rapid, preliminary data on the prevalence of EC usage among a sample of adolescents in Nairobi, with emphasis on the frequency of repeat use and its impact on risk-taking behaviors. As such, data analysis will focus on understanding the characteristics of three types of adolescents: those who have knowledge of EC, but have not used it; those who have used it once; and those who have used it more than once. Within each of these categories, the relationships between contraceptive knowledge of all types, knowledge and access to EC, risk perception and risky behaviors will be explored.

This information will help assess the validity of media claims regarding an epidemic of EC abuse in Nairobi and consequent risky sexual behaviors. It will also contribute to the emerging literature on the relationships between easy access to EC, adolescent sexuality, and HIV transmission. It is also intended to serve as formative research for a future qualitative study that further investigates the linkages between access to EC and risk perception.

---

<sup>i</sup> Dilys M. Walker, Torres P, Gutierrez JP, Flemming K, Bertozzi S. “Emergency Contraception Use is Correlated with Increased Condom Use among Adolescents: Results from Mexico.” *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 35 (2004) 329-334.

<sup>ii</sup> Gold M, Wolford J, Smith K, Parker AM. “The Effects of Advance Provision of Emergency Contraception on Adolescent women’s Sexual and Contraceptive Behaviors”. *Journal of Pediatric Adolescent Gynecology*. 17 (2004): 87-96.

<sup>iii</sup> Dupont S, Webber J, Dass K, Thorton S. “Emergency contraceptive pill (ECP) and sexual risk behaviour”. *International Journal of STD & AIDS*. 13 (2002): 483-485.