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How to: Birth control and the pharmacy

Your one-stop shop for the pill, the patch, the ring, barrier methods, and emergency contraception.



by Valerie French, MD

over 4 years ago

UPDATE: Pharmacists in [Oregon](#) and [California](#) can now prescribe and dispense certain kinds of birth control!

Whether you have a prescription from a health care provider or just need to stock up on [condoms](#), your local pharmacy can be a great resource to keep you protected from pregnancy and STIs.

I have my prescription already

Most pharmacies have a variety of [pills](#), [the ring](#), and [the patch](#) on hand at all times. If you have one particular brand of pill that you like and the pharmacy doesn't usually stock it, they should be able to order it for you within a few days.

What happens if you ask a pharmacist to fill your birth control prescription and for some reason they refuse? It doesn't happen very often, but if it happens to you, here are some options:

1. Stand your ground. Many states protect the right of a woman seeking to fill her birth control prescription. Some states (CA, IL, ME, MA, NV, NJ, WA, and WI) require that a pharmacy provide patients with *any medication* they're prescribed. Some states (AL, DE, NY, NC, OR, PA, and TX) allow a pharmacist to refuse to fill a prescription, but they are then required to find someone else who will fill the prescription.
2. Forget 'em. Take your business to another pharmacy. Some states (AZ, AR, GA, ID, MS, and SD) have laws that let pharmacists refuse to sell certain types of birth control—also known as “conscience clauses.”
3. Change of scene. Grab some condoms while you’re there and talk to your health care provider about birth control options that don’t require a pharmacist. [The shot](#), the [IUD](#), and the [implant](#) will all let you wash that pharmacist out of your hair.
4. Take action. If the idea of pharmacists not filling people’s prescriptions makes you mad, check out the [National Women’s Law Center’s suggestions](#) for what you can do about it.

Good news for women with health insurance: you can most likely get prescription birth control from a pharmacy [without a copay](#). In fact, CVS was found to be [charging illegal copays](#) and had to send refunds

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to all the customers they had charged. If you feel like your pharmacy isn't quite up to speed about the new health care law, [share this resource with them](#). If your insurance doesn't cover your birth control or still requires a copay, call or email [CoverHer](#) for help (1-866-745-5487 or coverher@nwlc.org).

I don't have a prescription

Pills ran out last month? Haven't had time to see your health care provider to get another prescription? Your pharmacist may be able to help! In many states, pharmacists are allowed to give you a pack of pills, a ring, or a box of patches in the case of an emergency—and running out of birth control can definitely be an emergency! Your pharmacist may also be able to help you out by contacting your health care provider and requesting a short-term refill for a few months of your method.

If you live in [California](#) or [Oregon](#), [pharmacists can write a prescription for some hormonal methods](#). Sally Rafie, a pharmacist at the University of San Diego, says "California women without a prescription will be able go directly to the pharmacy and get these methods. The idea is to make these forms of birth control more accessible." The law is still pretty new, and not all pharmacists will participate in the new program, so call ahead to find out.

Pharmacists in Alaska, California, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Washington have laws allowing them to write prescriptions for the [emergency contraceptive \(EC\) pill ella](#), which is only available with a prescription. If you prefer Plan B One-Step or a generic levonorgestrel-based EC pill but [you're hoping to get it covered by your insurance](#), [pharmacists in some states may be able to write you a prescription](#). Not all pharmacists participate in the EC programs, so call ahead to find out.

In the aisles, no prescription needed

There are a bunch of birth control methods available [without a prescription in the pharmacy aisles](#): male and [female condoms](#), [the sponge](#), [spermicides](#), and some brands of EC. Anyone can buy these regardless of age or sex. Some pharmacies carry a wide variety of choices, so have fun!

There's a lot of confusion about who can buy EC, which is now in the aisles, too (although sometimes it's in one of those locked cases because it's expensive). Despite what you may have heard, [guys and gals of all ages can buy levonorgestrel-based EC pills like Plan B One-Step and Next Choice One Dose without a prescription](#). If someone tries to tell you otherwise, you can show them [this factsheet](#). That means you just head to the pharmacy when you need EC—no appointments, no prescriptions, no fuss.

Valerie French, MD, MAS, completed a fellowship in family planning before joining the Ob/Gyn faculty at the University of Kansas. She loves working at a teaching hospital and sharing her passion for family planning with learners. Dr. French is interested in improving access to reproductive health services in under-served areas, as she herself had difficulty obtaining birth control in college.

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