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Morning-after pills treated like sweets

NEW DELHI: Heavy use of "morning-after" pills is causing concern in India where the government has banned advertisements criticised for promoting them as a primary contraceptive rather than an emergency measure.

Emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs), which can prevent pregnancy if taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex, were freely available over the counter in the country, which remains largely conservative to sex and sex education.

More than 8.2 million ECPs were sold last year, an increase of 250 per cent from the previous year, and health workers are concerned that the pills are being misused.

"It's all very well to say people are becoming sexually liberal, but who's going to talk about the long-term effects of this quick solution?" said Radhika Chandiramani, a clinical psychologist who helms a sexual health organisation.

"The manufacturers don't mention it in their media campaigns. Parents and teachers don't teach children about sex, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and contraceptives. So, who is going to tell these kids that these pills are not sweets?"

India is plagued with poor healthcare and one of the main reasons for introducing freely

available oral contraceptives was to make them accessible to women in rural areas where the majority of unsafe abortions occur.

The two most popular brands in India are "I-pill" and "Unwanted 72".

Rippon Nath, who owns a pharmacy here, said the number of customers asking for ECPs was growing on a monthly basis.

"Some even come and take up to four boxes at a time."

ECPs contain significantly higher doses of the same hormones found in regular oral contraceptive pills, and are recommended for periodic rather than regular use.

Doctors in India said the growing popularity of the pills and the apparent frequency with which they are being taken was disturbing on two levels.

Besides heightening the risk of negative side effects, routine use suggested they were being favoured over condoms without offering the same protection against sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection.

Divya, a 19-year-old student who recently moved here, said she found morning-after pills useful because many Indian men were irresponsible about protection.

"We have to trust the partner to use pro-

tection and often they don't want to, so these pills are great ways to make sure we protect ourselves and need not rely on our partners."

Anuradha Kapoor, a gynaecologist at Max Healthcare Hospital here, said such attitudes were understandable but misplaced.

"There is a lot of misuse. You are supposed to take it once in so many months, and no one tells you that. A lot of teenagers are taking it like a daily contraceptive."

ECPs had a ready market in a country like India where extramarital pregnancy was deeply frowned on and abortion — although legal — was still something of a taboo subject.

According to the "Consortium on National Consensus for Medical Abortion in India", 11 million abortions were performed in India annually and 20,000 women died from abortion-related complications every year.

The idea of abortion as shameful and traumatic was the subject of a controversial advertisement for the I-pill, which showed a young, unmarried woman anxiously slipping away from her parents' home and ended up weeping outside a run-down abortion clinic in a darkened alley.

"Preventing a pregnancy is better than an abortion, isn't it?" the advertisement said. — AFP



Morning-after pills in India are freely available and young women are taking them like a daily contraceptive. — AFP picture