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The Long Walk to the Pharmacy: Purchasing Plan B

By Emily Duhovny, 18, Staff Writer

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I've been to Pathmark many times before, but this time is different. I'm not here to pick up a bag of chips or a magazine, but instead I'm about to buy Plan B—a type of birth control that prevents pregnancy after unprotected sex, which is why it's sometimes called “emergency contraception.” I haven't even had unprotected sex, so I don't really need Plan B. I am here for one purpose only: to investigate where and how teens can get Plan B.

You need a prescription to get Plan B if you're 17 or under in most states, but it's just been made available over the counter to people 18 and over. You might have heard that some pharmacists are refusing to sell it.

As I walk toward the pharmacy, I notice how crowded the store is. A part of me wants to turn around and race out to the parking lot, but I know what I have to do. Eventually I find the small corner where the pharmacy is located. When I see that only a few people are there, I breathe a sigh of relief. I walk past the array of condoms and pregnancy tests and make my way toward the desk. In a meek voice I ask, “Is the pharmacist in?”

As soon as the words slip out of my mouth, I realize how silent it is and how it feels as if everyone around is listening in. While the lady at the desk calls the pharmacist over, I start to feel uneasy. I think I know what to expect. After all, I'm on the editorial staff of *Sex, Etc.*, and I consider myself a pretty knowledgeable teenager.

The Interrogation Unfolds

The conversation starts off as expected with the pharmacist asking me how she can help. I introduce myself as a *Sex, Etc.* reporter and ask if they sell Plan B. From the start, she makes it clear that you have to be 18 to purchase it over the counter. If you're under 18, there's no way she's giving it out. As I ask her more questions, I begin to relax, and she actually seems more nervous than I am.

I ask, "If I'm 18 years old, what do I need to bring?"

"If you're 18 or older you need to bring ID. You might also get asked some questions that range anywhere from if you've had unprotected sex to whether or not you have a stable family. The rest of the questions really depend on what pharmacy you're at and the specific pharmacist who's helping you," she explains.

A New Experience for Everyone

At first, I'm a little shocked. Why would anyone be asked so many intrusive questions? And if you don't give the right answers, will the pharmacists refuse to sell you Plan B? I almost couldn't believe that a pharmacist was allowed to question me like that. Imagine how you would respond if you went to buy tampons, and the cashier started asking you if you really needed them or suggested that you just use pads instead! I for one would be pissed off. It's not OK for a pharmacist to grill you about how stable your family is. I told the pharmacist how surprised I was, and she explained that this was the first time anyone had come in to ask about Plan B.

No Two Pharmacies Are Exactly Alike

I visited six pharmacies. Some pharmacists were willing to sell it to males, some asked many questions and others asked none. Out of the six pharmacies, five were willing to sell Plan B, four had it in stock and only one had actually had people come in to buy it. Most of the pharmacists explained that this was new for them, too, since it wasn't until December 2006 that pharmacies began selling it over the counter. At one pharmacy, they reassured me that they sell Plan B only to admit a few seconds later that they don't actually keep any in stock. Well, that's a big help!

So what's the moral of all of this?

Buying Plan B is not necessarily simple, but you can do it! If you have a valid ID that confirms you are 18 or over, you don't have to answer any questions, and you can demand to be sold Plan B. You should keep in mind that this is new for many pharmacists. You might be the first person they have ever sold Plan B to. This means that you need to go in there as your own advocate. Know the facts

and know what you're entitled to. Most pharmacies require pharmacists to sell you Plan B or to refer you to someone who will. As a last resort, you can always go to your local Planned Parenthood. Call **1-800-230-PLAN (7526)** to find a Planned Parenthood near you.

Not Always Simple, But Worth It

Buying Plan B might seem like a hassle. You have to act quickly and find a pharmacy near you that is willing to sell it. It has some uncomfortable side effects, and it might cost you anywhere from \$25 to \$40.

Is it worth all the trouble? Of, course.

When thinking about Plan B, you need to keep the big picture in mind. Plan B is 75- to 89-percent effective at preventing a pregnancy when taken within 72 hours (3 days), though you can take it up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected sex. The sooner you take it, the better.

Hopefully, the controversy over offering Plan B over the counter will start to die down, and more people will be made aware of their options. Until then, you might face some difficulty buying Plan B, but it's a small cost compared to dealing with an unplanned pregnancy.