

CONTRACEPTION

Teens and 'morning-after' pill

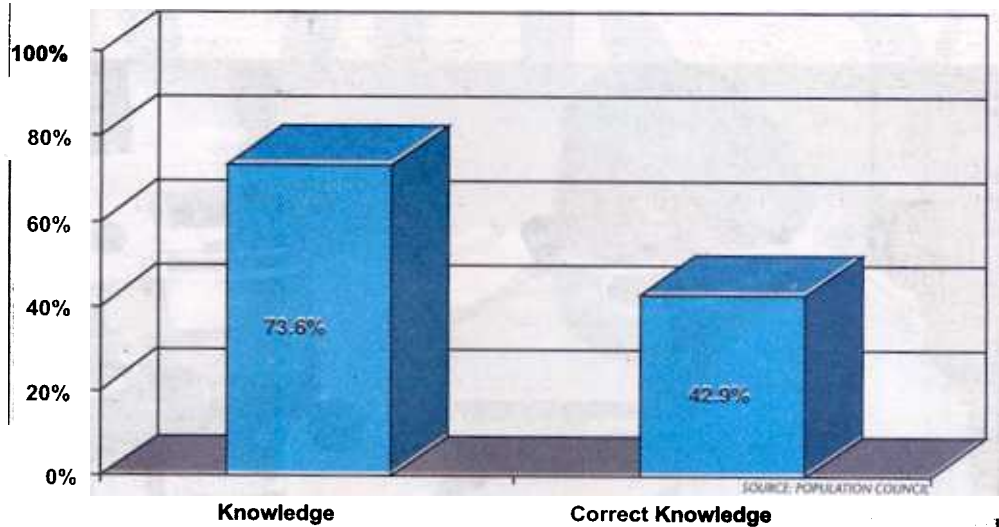
There is a worrying state of misinformation about the popular morning-after pill among local teenagers though their usage has not reached epidemic levels, says a news study presented at an international sexual health conference in Nairobi on Tuesday.

The study: *Like Chocolate: Adolescent Emergency Contraception Use* in Nairobi carried out by Emory University of Atlanta US and Population Council of Kenya had been triggered by an article carried in this magazine two years ago. On May 13, 2004, *Horizon* carried a story based on interviews with medical experts and pharmacies on what was deemed widespread use of morning after pills in Nairobi. The article said in part, "the demand for the pills is very high with pharmacists we talked to saying they make record sales over weekends, month ends and during school holidays."

"In response, last year we conducted a study to test the allegations," says study presenter Dr Jill Keesbury of the Population Council.

Among its finding, says Keesbury, is that despite availability of the pills in the public sector, nearly all users get it from pharmacies. "This is consistent with other studies, which show adolescents are more likely to get emergency contraceptives from pharmacies." The most likely reason given for this, according to the study, is that pharmacists don't ask as many questions as clinics and are faster and more convenient for young people to visit.

This finding presents a new challenge to the Ministry of Health, which has since



incorporated EC into its mainstream family planning programme. The media report, says Keesbury, has had an impact on the national policy debate with the Ministry of Health deciding to integrate EC into the public sector contraceptive method mix.

"However, officials remain wary of a popular backlash because of its increasingly controversial nature. Not only has EC been tenuously linked to risky sexual behaviour, but it has also been incorrectly associated with abortion."

The study concludes that Nairobi teenagers are not using the morning-after pills like chocolate but knowledge about them, though high in the City, is in most cases the wrong information.

The study found that three out of four of all adolescents interviewed identified EC spontaneously or when asked "is there anything a woman can do after she has had sex to prevent pregnancy?" But the study specifies that knowledge levels may not be as high in rural areas as in towns. But even though

74 per cent of the surveyed population knew about EC, only about half of them identified it correctly – as a method used within 72 hours of unprotected sex to prevent pregnancy.

For those who don't have the proper knowledge, says Keesbury, it means they could use it incorrectly, resulting in pregnancy, disease transmission, or replacement of longer-term and more effective methods. One explanation for the knowledge gap is that most, almost half, of those who know about EC, learn about it from their friends or family. "These sources are not typically well-versed on contraceptive methods, and are likely to provide incorrect or incomplete information," says Keesbury.

However, the study says that the knowledge – even incorrect knowledge – of EC does not necessarily translate into use.

"Although this data cannot comment on whether the knowledge directly affects use, it does support scores of earlier studies demonstrating a weak relationship between the two factors. Keesbury and her team

Only about a half of interviewees had correct knowledge on emergency contraceptives.

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conclude that the use of EC in Nairobi is still relatively low compared to other methods.

A key finding of this study is that use – and especially repeat use – of EC is much lower than implied by the media, and commonly believed.

"Our findings suggest that girls are not, in fact, eating EC like chocolate. While there is some repeat use, it does not appear to be an epidemic of any proportion. The morning-after pill needs to be taken within 72 hours after unprotected sex. Although lots of people talk about 'the morning-after Pill' this term is actually very misleading. Why? Because, you don't have to take this pill on 'the morning after' having sex. However, it works best if taken within 24 hours of unprotected sex. EC stops you from becoming pregnant – at least, in the vast majority of cases. It's not 100 per cent effective, but the failure rate is quite low.

–GATONYE GATHURA