

FDA makes 'Plan B' pill more available: Action angers some groups opposed to abortion rights

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After a three-year debate, the federal Food and Drug Administration has approved wider distribution of a "morning-after" contraceptive, angering some religious conservatives.

FDA officials say they have approved nonprescription sales of "Plan B," a drug designed to prevent ovulation and fertilization of a woman's egg. The decision, however, only allows women 18 years of age or older to have over-the-counter access to the drug.

The decision announced August 24 came just days after the agency's acting director said he was prepared to expand the drug's availability and President Bush expressed solidarity with that decision. Both actions angered some groups opposed to abortion rights.

The agency's policy change was opposed by Family Research Council president Tony Perkins. "An agency charged with protecting the health interests of the country must be held to high standards of accountability," Perkins said in a statement. "Congress must respond to this outrageous action by the FDA."

Some religious groups, including the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, hailed the decision, saying the pill (if taken promptly) prevents pregnancy rather than ending it.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice went further, saying the pill should also be made available to women under 18. "The arbitrary cut-off age for 18 for over-the-counter access shows that young women's health is still a target for ideology and political games," said coalition president Carlton Veazey, who called the new FDA policy "far from perfect."

Plan B is different from RU-486 (also known as Mifeprex or mifepristone), which the FDA had already approved amid similar controversy. RU-486 is intended to end pregnancies after an egg has been fertilized.

Plan B has been available for several years on a prescription basis to women of all ages. It contains higher doses of chemicals used in common birth-control pills. The two-pill regimen is supposed to be taken as soon as possible after sexual intercourse, in order to prevent an unintended pregnancy.

Some research has shown that the drug can, in rare circumstances, also prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg in a woman's womb. Pro-life groups consider that tantamount to abortion and have opposed widening availability of Plan B for that reason. They also have opposed the drug on the basis that it may lead to an increase in promiscuity. *-Associated Baptist Press, Religion News Service*