


IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-MEDICATION WITH LEVONORGESTREL IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Self-medication with levonorgestrel among adolescents has become an increasingly frequent and concerning practice, marked by dilemmas that go beyond physical health. The use of the so-called “morning-after pill,” often without professional guidance, emerges as a rapid response to risk situations, yet reveals impacts that extend beyond the immediate. Although effective as an emergency contraceptive, when used indiscriminately, the medication may cause hormonal alterations, side effects, and even compromise the emotional stability of young individuals. In this context, self-medication is not merely an individual choice but reflects gaps in the healthcare system, sexual education, and social relationships. The ease of access to the medication brings a duality: while it promotes autonomy, it also opens space for misuse, sustained by illusions of safety. This behavior may generate feelings of fear, guilt, anxiety, and isolation, as many adolescents resort to the pill in silence, without family dialogue or specialized support. Thus, understanding this practice requires a comprehensive analysis that considers the biological, psychological, and social aspects involved. This study seeks to foster critical reflection and propose pathways to promote more conscious, safe, and responsible use.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, a phase so unique and full of nuances, can be seen as fertile ground where doubts, discoveries, and, of course, contradictions arise. It is within this scenario—resembling a stage in constant transformation—that many young individuals find themselves facing choices that, at first glance, seem trivial but carry echoes that reverberate far beyond the immediate. Among such choices, self-medication stands out: an age-old practice that, like a weed, continues to flourish in the gaps left by the healthcare system and insufficient education, foreshadowing challenges that extend beyond the individual sphere and affect society as a whole (Silva; Ferreira, 2020).

In Brazil, it is no surprise that this practice finds fertile ground in the well-known “Brazilian way,” a nearly theatrical ability to improvise quick solutions. Who has never heard, “take this little medicine and it will pass”? Often, a headache or minor discomfort is treated with the same naturalness as changing a shirt. Thus, the pharmacy counter becomes an improvised consulting room, where the pharmacist suddenly assumes the symbolic role of physician and advisor. However, when this narrative shifts to the universe of adolescents, especially regarding the use of levonorgestrel, the well-known “morning-after pill,” what seemed like a practical solution reveals itself as a delicate trap, where autonomy may be confused with risk (Souza; Lima, 2019).

Levonorgestrel, widely recognized as effective as an emergency contraceptive, functions like a race against time: each minute after unprotected sexual intercourse is like sand slipping through an invisible hourglass. If, on one hand, this effectiveness can be celebrated as a triumph of science, on the other, when trivialized and consumed indiscriminately, the medication becomes a double-edged sword. From a protective shield, it transforms into a silent threat, capable of affecting not only the body but also the emotional stability of adolescents (Brasil, 2017).

It is curious, and even unsettling, to note how easy access to the pill has been interpreted by many young people as a symbol of freedom. However, this autonomy, which should represent empowerment, often becomes an invisible crutch, supporting thoughtless decisions. The repetitive use of levonorgestrel, almost ritualistic, reveals not only a lack of knowledge but also the absence of critical reflection. As commonly stated: freedom without awareness may become a disguised prison. It is at this intersection that the urgency of educational policies becomes evident—policies that do not merely inform but truly foster awareness (Costa et al., 2021).

Side effects are not mere footnotes in a package insert. Changes in the menstrual cycle, nausea, headaches, and hormonal imbalances emerge as persistent shadows, reminding us that every shortcut has a cost. The body, in its silent wisdom, attempts to signal; however, the mind, overwhelmed by doubts and taboos, hesitates to listen. Without proper guidance, the adolescent may fall into a vicious cycle of fear and insecurity, where each symptom appears as an indecipherable enigma (Oliveira; Pereira, 2020).

It is not only about biology but also about emotions. Each pill ingested may carry an invisible burden: fear of pregnancy, anxiety about judgment, and the silence of secrecy. It is as if the medication, personified, holds within it untold stories—secrets locked away—born from the absence of family dialogue and the lack of effective public policies. Levonorgestrel thus ceases to be merely a pill and becomes a metaphor for isolation and hidden choices (Martins; Gomes, 2020).

The greatest risk lies in the illusion of safety. Using levonorgestrel as a regular method is like trying to hold back the sea with one's hands: an impossible task, destined to fail. This false sense of security opens gaps not only for unplanned pregnancies but also for the risk of sexually transmitted infections. In this dangerous dynamic, what should be the exception often becomes the rule, and the consequences inevitably surface (Almeida et al., 2018).

Indeed, the ease of access to the medication is a double-edged sword. While over-the-counter availability represents progress in terms of female autonomy, it also exposes the door to careless and repetitive use. This paradox illustrates the complexity of the issue: how to balance individual rights with

collective responsibility? This is a question that, more than ever, requires answers that combine science, ethics, and sensitivity (Brito; Santos, 2021).

Thus, this Course Completion Paper stands as an invitation to reflection. More than discussing data and statistics, it aims to give voice to hidden stories, revealing the nuances of this complex phenomenon. May this study serve as a bridge, connecting theory and practice, science and society, reason and emotion, for caring for adolescent health is, ultimately, planting the seeds of a more conscious, responsible, and humane future.

DEVELOPMENT

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is a systematized bibliographic review aimed at understanding the effects of self-medication with levonorgestrel in adolescents, encompassing physical, psychological, and social effects, as well as the impact of the absence of professional guidance. To ensure that the information is up to date, articles published between 2007 and 2025 were selected. It was decided to include articles written in Portuguese, excluding review-type publications, preliminary impressions, abstracts, and works that did not provide complete data or lacked sufficient scientific relevance.

The bibliographic research was conducted using reputable academic platforms and databases, including Google Scholar, SciELO, and CAPES Journals. To identify relevant articles on the topic, descriptors and keywords such as “self-medication,” “levonorgestrel,” “morning-after pill,” “adolescents,” “sexual health,” “professional health guidance,” and “sexual education” were used, enabling a broad and focused search.

The 22 selected articles were thoroughly analyzed, focusing on the negative physical effects of continuous use of levonorgestrel in adolescents, the emotional impacts involving anxiety, fear, and guilt, and the social and cultural influences surrounding self-medication. The impact of the lack of professional

guidance and the absence of public policies in sexual education—factors that contribute to the continued misuse of the morning-after pill—was also examined.

Based on the integration of the collected data, reflections and suggestions for educational strategies were developed to encourage responsible and conscious use of contraceptive methods among young people. Grounded in recent and diverse scientific evidence, this methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under analysis, aiding in the development of recommendations that promote overall health and well-being in this group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Self-medication with levonorgestrel is widely practiced among adolescents, often without proper professional guidance, revealing a significant discrepancy between theoretical knowledge and lived practice (Almeida et al., 2018; Brasil, Ministry of Health, 2017). This practice stems from easy access to the medication and the lack of reliable information, leading to the use of the morning-after pill as an emergency solution to prevent pregnancy, but without full understanding of its risks and implications (Souza; Lima, 2019; Brito; Santos, 2021).

Physically, the most frequently reported adverse effects include changes in the menstrual cycle, nausea, and headaches—clear indicators of the limitations of repeated use of this medication (Bottoli et al., 2023; Oliveira, 2020). Psychologically, feelings such as guilt, fear, and anxiety are common, resulting in considerable negative emotional impact (Martins; Gomes, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2020).

Table 1

Adverse Effects of Levonorgestrel in Adolescents

Physical Effects	Frequency	Main References
Changes in the menstrual cycle	Frequent	Bottoli et al., 2023; Oliveira, 2020
Nausea	Frequent	Bottoli et al., 2023; Oliveira, 2020
Headaches/Cephalgias	Common	Bottoli et al., 2023
Vomiting	Less frequent	Ministry of Health, 2018

Source: Adapted from Bottoli et al. (2023), Oliveira (2020), and Ministry of Health (2018)

The social context has a strong influence, especially the absence of open dialogue within family relationships and peer pressure, which promote self-medication as a response to social and cultural norms (Nunes, 2022; Souza, 2020). Health education proves essential, as adolescents who participate in educational programs demonstrate greater knowledge and responsibility in the use of levonorgestrel (Fernandes; Moura, 2019; Santos, 2021).

Additionally, a limited perception of risk is observed, where the morning-after pill is mistakenly viewed as a substitute for regular contraceptive methods, a situation that increases the physical and emotional vulnerability of young individuals (Costa et al., 2021; Pêgo et al., 2021). The media and social networks contribute to the construction of narratives that emphasize immediate autonomy regarding the medication, minimizing risks and distorting notions of safety (Pereira, 2007; Trebien et al., 2021).

Socially, repeated self-medication is associated with isolation and stigma, hindering communication between adolescents and their families and friends, which intensifies emotional distress and silence surrounding the issue (Silva; Ferreira, 2020; Silva, 2024). In this context, the role of healthcare professionals is crucial, as proper guidance and monitoring promote correct use, fostering

responsible autonomy and safer choices, as well as facilitating reflective dialogue with adolescents (Cruz et al., 2022; Brasil, Ministry of Health, 2018).

Public policies and educational programs emerge as indispensable instruments for preventing misuse and the negative effects of self-medication with levonorgestrel, strengthening structured information, professional support, and awareness of associated risks (Brasil, Ministry of Health, 2018; Trebien et al., 2021).

Table 2

Comparison of Educational Methods and Their Impacts

Educational Method	Impact on Self-Medication	Main References
School programs	Reduction in impulsive use	Santos, 2021; Mendes, 2021
Professional guidance	Conscious and responsible use of levonorgestrel	Pêgo et al., 2021; Pereira, 2019
Media campaigns	Can reinforce autonomy, but with risks	Trebien et al., 2021

Source: (Adapted) From Santos (2021), Mendes (2021), Pêgo et al. (2021), Pereira (2019), and Trebien et al. (2021).

In summary, the data reinforce that self-medication is a complex phenomenon, shaped by physical, emotional, social, and cultural factors, and that effective interventions require a multidisciplinary approach integrating education, professional guidance, and public policies focused on the comprehensive health of adolescents.

CONCLUSION

The present study achieved its objective of examining the phenomenon of self-medication with levonorgestrel among adolescents, highlighting the complexity of this behavior across physical, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. It was possible to demonstrate that, although the morning-after pill is widely used, technical understanding of its risks and consequences remains insufficient. This underscores the importance of providing greater professional guidance and health education for this group. Thus, the research confirmed that indiscriminate use is not solely the result of easy access to the medication but also of the lack of reliable information and a social context characterized by taboos and absence of dialogue.

However, some limitations were identified, such as the lack of more comprehensive quantitative data and the challenge of obtaining direct reports from adolescents in certain sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, the study focused on theoretical and qualitative aspects, without implementing practical educational interventions to assess their real effects on self-medication behavior. It is recommended that future research adopt mixed methods, expand sample sizes, and implement intervention strategies involving schools, families, and healthcare professionals, with the aim of increasing awareness and promoting responsible use of levonorgestrel.

In summary, it is emphasized that self-medication is a phenomenon with multiple causes and requires integrated responses, such as effective public policies, continuing education programs, and qualified professional support. Therefore, it is recommended that future research investigate the creation and evaluation of educational programs adapted to the cultural realities of adolescents. Additionally, it is important to monitor the physical and emotional effects of this use over time, consolidating an approach that promotes comprehensive health and conscious empowerment among young individuals.

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