Kenya concern over pill popping

By Anne Mawathe
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In a radio advertisement at the centre of a controversy in Kenya, a distraught teenage girl asks for help after having unprotected sex.

"What shall I do? I'm still in college. What happens to my future, my friends, my family, my life?" she sobs.

The assistance offered is the emergency contraceptive pill - or morning-after pill.

The so-called "e-pill", which is also being advertised in popular magazines with a free bookmark, is now the buzz-word in town among young sexually active women.

"I do use e-pills," Florence, a university student in Nairobi, told the BBC.

"The main reason is because sometimes I have not considered having sex with my boy and then we just find ourselves [having it], so that calls for the use of e-pills."

Gillian, also a university student, says she uses them as one of her main forms of contraception.

"Sex is very sweet. You cannot go having sex with a condom - so why go for the condom when I know the e-pills are there? I know I won't get pregnant," she said.

'Reckless'

It is this attitude which is worrying various organisations.

They believe the advertising campaign is influencing young people to be sexually reckless.

Many young people are now using the e-pill routinely, some even buying the pills in advance.

Josephine Kibaru, head of family health in the ministry of health, is a strong advocate of contraception.

But she has some reservations about the intense media campaign promoting the emergency pill.
"The impression I get is that university girls are using these pills irresponsibly... If they are needing them it means they have had unprotected sex," she said.

"My concern actually is about the HIV/Aids... it is something that will ruin their lives forever."

"I would rather those adverts showed more mature women. And I would want to see the message go beyond the emergency."

The Pharmaceutical Society of Kenya has also voiced concerns about long-term use of the e-pill.

Besides side-effects, like nausea, heavy bleeding and cramps, regular use of the emergency contraception may cause infertility and in some instances increase the risk of cancer.

"The youth are getting the message that it's OK to go out and have fun because you won't get pregnant," says Dominic Karanja, chair of the Pharmaceutical Society of Kenya.

"They have changed the attitude of the youth even shifted them from thinking about STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] - about HIV/AIDS - to thinking about getting pregnant."

There is a notable increase in the sale of the pills during school holidays and weekends, Dr Karanja says.

According to Kenya's Pharmacy and Poisons board, it is against Kenyan law to advertise such drugs to the public.

However, the US non-governmental organisation funding the campaign - Populations Services International - says it has the government's approval to run the adverts.

In fact the advertisements that have been appearing in local newspapers have been endorsed by the government.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Kenya has also asked the PSI to stop the adverts.

**Choice**

But PSI country director Daun Fest says it is not promoting specific products but creating awareness in Kenya, where it is illegal to have an abortion.

She argues that the use of the emergency pill decreases the high incidences of unsafe and botched abortions.

"The reality is that we're presenting choices," says Ms Fest.

"Research shows young people start their sexual lives at about the age of 17 - and they're starting without correct information, without knowing what the options are."
She disagrees with critics who argue that the e-pill increases the risk of contracting HIV by encouraging unprotected sex.

"No research has ever proved that any reproductive health product has increased promiscuity.

"In fact much of the research shows that the younger you start education, the more likely you're likely you're going to have lower teenage pregnancy."

Health experts in Kenya believe that the government is not able to stop such campaigns because they depend on organisations like PSI to fund some of its health programmes.

Like abortion and other reproductive health issues in Kenya, the debate over the use of e-pills will continue to be divisive and controversial.