



## Facts on abortion

### Who has abortions?

Lots of women have abortions – white women, black women, Asian women, mixed race women, rich women, poor women, young women, older women, women who have children, and women who don't. So there's no such thing as the kind of woman who has an abortion! By the time they're 45 almost one in three women in the UK will have had an abortion. That means that although it's not spoken about very often, everyone already knows someone who's had an abortion.

### Why do women have abortions?

Women have abortions because they don't want, or are unable to have a child (or another child) at this point in their life. This could be for many different reasons. Some common ones are:

- She wants to carry on with her education/job/career
- She feels too young to be a parent right now
- She already has children, and feels too old to start again
- She does not have the support she needs from her partner or family
- She cannot provide for a child right now
- She does not feel this is the right relationship in which to start a family
- She does not want to have children

### If women don't want to get pregnant why don't they use contraception?

Most methods of contraception are not 100% effective, so there is no guarantee that a woman will not become pregnant, even when she uses contraception carefully.

Accidents happen too. Despite people's best intentions, sometimes people don't use contraception properly every time they have sex – condoms can be put on too late or taken off too soon; sometimes they're not used at all. It is easy to forget to take the contraceptive pill, and sickness, diarrhoea and antibiotics can all affect how well the pill works.

There are now Long Acting Reversible Contraceptive (LARC) methods which are extremely safe and don't rely on being used perfectly every day or every time a couple has sex and these often suit women who can't remember to use contraception regularly.

Sometimes the woman's ability to use contraception is affected by her partner – he may not want her to use contraception or to use condoms himself. Lack of information might mean she didn't know where to go to get contraception or that she could have a confidential conversation with her doctor about it.

Three forms of emergency contraception are available for women who have unprotected sex, the most common - the 'morning after pill' - is most effective if taken within 24 hours. If contraception has failed and a woman becomes pregnant unintentionally, it is important that she has the space to make up her own mind about the outcome – and whether or not she wants to become a parent at this point in her life.

### Can you have an abortion if you're under 16?

Women under the age of 16 can have an abortion. Health professionals will always discuss with the young woman the benefits of involving her parents or careers in her decision, but will respect her wishes if she does not want to involve them.

So long as the young woman understands fully the decision she is making, and it is her own choice to have an abortion, a doctor can arrange one without parental involvement. However, if she needs a general anaesthetic the doctor will ask that another adult (for example another family member), accompany her to help support her and look after her.

### Is there a time limit for abortion?

The legal time limit for abortion is 24 weeks. However, the vast majority are carried out when the woman is less than 12 weeks pregnant.

If a woman wants an abortion, it is important that she acts quickly to arrange one. The longer the pregnancy goes on the harder it is to obtain an abortion because fewer clinics provide them. This often means that the woman has to travel outside of her local area for an abortion, and may need to find her own way of getting there.

In exceptional circumstances, such as where the pregnancy threatens the woman's life, or where the foetus is at risk of serious disability, an abortion can take place after 24 weeks.

### Where do you go if you want an abortion?

A young woman can visit her local young people's clinic (such as Brook) or a family planning clinic if she wants to be referred for an abortion. Staff there will be used to talking to young people and supporting them in their choices about pregnancy and abortion. They will arrange the necessary paperwork and make an appointment for the young woman at the abortion clinic.

Some independent pregnancy advice centres, which offer free pregnancy testing and advice, won't help women to get an abortion, so it may be better to go to an NHS service or talk to someone you trust about where to go.

GPs can also refer for abortions, and most are happy to support a woman in the decision she makes. Some GPs won't do this though, because they choose to opt out of being involved in abortion services. It's usually a good idea therefore to ring ahead and ask the receptionist if doctors at that practice will refer.

Remember, the decision a woman makes about her pregnancy is hers alone. If a doctor refuses to help a woman obtain an abortion when that is what she wants, she has the right to ask for help from another doctor.

## How do they do abortions? Can you just take a pill? Does it hurt? Are you asleep when it happens?

There are two ways of ending an unwanted pregnancy; a medical abortion (which involves taking medicines) or a surgical abortion (which requires a surgical procedure).

The type of abortion you can have depends on several factors but you should always be able to choose the method you would prefer as long as it suits your medical needs. The doctor or nurse advising you will tell you which methods are suitable based on your medical history, how many weeks the pregnancy is and whether you prefer to be awake or asleep for the procedure.

### **Up to 10 weeks: Early Medical Abortion – sometimes known as ‘the abortion pill’**

Early medical abortion can involve two visits to a clinic and is performed in the first ten weeks of pregnancy.

This method involves taking two medicines which end a pregnancy. It's not the same as emergency contraception, which can be taken to try to prevent pregnancy from happening in the first few days after unprotected sex.

The first medication you will be given is mifepristone, which ends the pregnancy. The second medication is misoprostol and can be given at the same time as the first medication or you will return to the clinic between 1 to 3 days later. Your doctor or nurse will inform you whether you need to come back for the second medication. The second medication causes your womb to expel the pregnancy through cramping and bleeding and this usually takes between 4 and 6 hours but sometimes longer. You will be offered pain relief and you should be able to go home the same day.

You will have cramps and bleeding and are likely to spot blood for up to four weeks following the abortion.

[Read this guide from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service \(BPAS\) for more information on medical abortion.](#)

### **Up to 15 weeks: Vacuum Aspiration – sometimes known as ‘the suction method’**

For this procedure either a general (asleep) or local (awake) anaesthetic would be given. The procedure only takes about 5-10 minutes and there is no wound or stitches.

The cervix (the entrance to the womb at the top of the vagina) is gently stretched to allow a thin tube to pass through it into the womb. Once the tube is inserted the pregnancy is removed by suction. Most people only take an hour or so to recover and go home the same day.

[Read this guide from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service \(BPAS\) for more information on surgical abortion.](#)

### **Abortions after 15 weeks**

Abortion after 15 weeks is less common and most abortions happen in the first 13 weeks of pregnancy. However, sometimes people need to have an abortion later on in pregnancy. They might find that they need to travel out of their local area to do so, as abortion after 15 weeks is not always as easy to access. Again, it's important to talk to a doctor as soon as possible.

The exact procedure offered to you will be explained by a doctor or nurse before the abortion goes ahead. Here are the procedures that you may undergo:

Medical abortion can be carried out up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. You will be admitted to the clinic and be given two medications. The first medication is mifepristone, which ends the pregnancy and the second medication is misoprostol which expels the pregnancy. You will have contractions but should be given pain relief and looked after by a doctor or nurse until the pregnancy has passed. You will stay in the clinic until the abortion is complete. In some cases you might have to stay overnight until the pregnancy has passed.

Surgical dilation and evacuation (from 15 weeks of pregnancy) is a minor operation, and is usually done under general anaesthetic (meaning you will be asleep). It usually takes around 10-20 minutes. The opening to the womb, called the cervix, will be gently stretched, and the foetus will be removed using a suction tube. You might be able to go home the same day if it all goes well, or you might need a stay overnight in hospital. Afterwards, you may bleed a bit for up to three weeks.

[Read this guide from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service \(BPAS\) for more information on surgical dilation and evacuation.](#)

### **How will you feel afterwards?**

How a woman feels after her abortion will depend on the circumstances in which she had it, her reasons for having it, and how comfortable she felt with her decision. She may feel relieved or sad, or a mixture of both.

It is unusual for a woman to have lasting problems after an abortion – the vast majority of women are able to incorporate a decision to end a pregnancy into their lives well, and to move on. However, it is really important that the woman is confident in her decision to have an abortion and that it is her choice. Women who have been pressured into having an abortion or feel ambivalent about the decision may be more vulnerable to feelings of regret.

Women who have experienced mental illness before they became pregnant maybe more vulnerable to distress and depression following abortion, but research evidence demonstrates that abortion is not itself a cause of mental health problems.

### How many abortions can you have?

On average a woman is fertile for around 35 years. If she is sexually active (in a heterosexual relationship) for most of her fertile life she is likely to experience a number of pregnancies some of which she may choose to end in abortion. It is not unusual for women to have two or three abortions in their lifetime.

Whilst abortion is safe and commonplace it is a bigger intervention than using contraception. It is much better for women to use a regular and reliable contraceptive method and avoid unwanted pregnancy in the first place.

### If you have an abortion can you still have children in the future?

Yes and lots of women do! Abortion does not affect fertility and women are often fully fertile within just two weeks of having an abortion. So it is essential to choose a suitable form of contraception for immediate use following abortion.

### Are all religions against abortion?

The Roman Catholic Church, some Evangelical Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses are the only religions that oppose abortion in all cases. Most religions allow for abortion in some situations – for example, if continuing with the pregnancy will endanger the woman's health.

### Is abortion safe?

Abortion in the UK is safe. It is rare that complications from abortion arise, but if a woman experiences lasting pain, a high temperature or ongoing abdominal tenderness, she should see her doctor immediately as these could be signs of an infection. If an infection does take place it is very important that it is treated with antibiotics as soon as possible. Untreated infections can cause complications that can lead to infertility.

There are no links between abortion and breast cancer, and abortion itself does not affect the chances of becoming pregnant in the future, or carrying a pregnancy to term.

**For more information on Abortions, advice and how to get help, visit: [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)**

### About Education for choice (authors of the above information)

Education For Choice is the only UK charity dedicated to ensuring young people are supported to make and act on informed choices about pregnancy and abortion. We call for young people to have the FACTS about abortion whoever they are, wherever they ask, wherever they go.

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