

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 carers 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 fetus 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?

The vast majority of abortions take place before 12 weeks of pregnancy, when one of two methods may be used:

Medical abortion

If the woman is less than 9 weeks pregnant, she may be able to have an 'early medical abortion', which means she will be given medicine to end her pregnancy.

When a woman has an early medical abortion, she will need to visit the abortion clinic at least twice. On the first visit she will be given a tablet that blocks the hormone that makes the lining of the uterus (womb) hold on to the pregnancy and causes the pregnancy to end. At the second visit, two days later, she will be given another medicine that causes her uterus to start to cramp.

The pregnancy will then be lost in the bleeding that follows. This is similar to how a woman experiences natural miscarriage, and the woman can take pain relief to help ease the cramping that she feels.

It is normal to experience some bleeding on and off for around 7-14 days after the abortion.

If the woman stays at the clinic until after most of the bleeding has subsided (normally after about six hours), she will be able to go home afterwards and will not need to go back to the clinic for a post abortion check-up.

Vacuum aspiration

This method is usually used up to 15 weeks into pregnancy. It is the most commonly used method and is really another term for suction. A narrow tube is inserted into the uterus and suction is used to remove the pregnancy.

It can be performed under local anaesthetic, or if the woman prefers to be asleep, under general anaesthetic. The procedure itself takes about 10 to 15 minutes to perform.

If the woman has had a local anaesthetic she will be able to leave the clinic an hour or two afterwards. With a general anaesthetic she will be able to leave the clinic after about three hours, and she will be advised not to drive for about two days.

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 may be 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 and is in fact safer than pregnancy and childbirth.

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.

About Education for Choice

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, whoever they ask, wherever they go.

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