

## Abortion

Abortion is the end (termination) of a pregnancy. Most abortions are performed during the first trimester of pregnancy (up to 12 weeks), but some might be performed in the second trimester (12–24 weeks) or, in rare circumstances, in the third trimester (24–36 weeks).

A number of studies show most Australians support the idea of safe and legal abortion. It's important that all women have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decision.

### Abortion types

Two types of abortion are currently available:

- **Surgical abortion** - a low-risk procedure most commonly used for first trimester (7–12 weeks) abortion in Australia. Known as suction aspiration or suction curette, it involves removing the lining and contents of the uterus (womb). A range of other surgical techniques are used for abortion later in pregnancy.
- **Medical abortion** - a low-risk alternative to surgery used for terminating pregnancies earlier than 7–9 weeks (depending on the clinic). RU486 (mifepristone), also known as 'the abortion pill', is the most widely known medication used for this procedure. It's available in some clinics in Australia and is up to 98 per cent effective when used in the first nine weeks of pregnancy.

### Abortion in Victoria

Abortion is legal in Victoria. In 2008, *The Abortion Law Reform Act* decriminalised termination of pregnancy and set out guidelines for when abortion can take place. Any woman of any age can attend an abortion clinic in Victoria and access abortion until she is 24 weeks pregnant. Abortion after 24 weeks is legal, but isn't commonly performed. Two doctors must agree the termination is appropriate, considering the woman's relevant medical circumstances and her current and future physical, psychological and social circumstances.

Under Victorian law, a health practitioner who has a conscientious objection to providing abortion information must refer any woman seeking information about abortion services to another doctor who doesn't object. Doctors and nurses must perform an abortion in emergency situations where it's necessary to preserve the life of the pregnant woman, even if they object to abortion in general.

### Some facts about abortion

There are a number of myths and misconceptions about abortion. Some are based on beliefs from the past when abortion was illegal and 'backyard' procedures carried considerable risks, including infection and death.

Some facts about abortion include the following:

- Australia's abortion rate is reasonably low by international standards.
- Abortion is one of the safest and most commonly performed surgical procedures in Australia.
- International research shows women will still seek abortion, even if it's illegal.
- Over half of all women who have had an abortion were using contraception at the time they became pregnant. The World Health Organization estimates that if all couples used effective contraception 100 per cent of the time, there would still be six million unplanned pregnancies every year.

- Women don't always choose to have unprotected sex. Coercion, manipulation, rape and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs can deny a woman her right to act freely or use contraception.
- An abortion performed safely with no complications won't reduce a woman's future fertility.
- Abortion doesn't cause ongoing emotional distress for most women.
- There is no evidence that abortion causes breast cancer.
- RU486 is registered for use in 33 countries worldwide and around two million women in Europe and North America have been prescribed the drug since it was first used in 1988.

## Typical profile

Unplanned pregnancy can affect any woman of childbearing age, but studies show some women are more likely to have an abortion than others. The typical woman seeking abortion is:

- Aged in her 20s
- Single
- Childless
- Well educated
- Employed.

Research shows that at the time of an unplanned pregnancy:

- 60 per cent of women were using at least one form of contraception and one in five of those were using more than one method.
- 43 per cent of women who were using contraception were on the pill and 22 per cent were using condoms.

## Different laws can be confusing

A number of studies show most Australians support the idea of safe and legal abortion. However, laws vary between Australian states and territories, which can be confusing. Most of the variation is around the reason for abortion and the stage of pregnancy. Early abortion (up to 14 weeks) is available Australia wide and later abortion is available in most states and territories.

The confusion around the law and the limited services available might prevent women from accessing abortion in a timely manner, especially in rural or remote areas.

## Abortion rates in Australia

The exact number of abortions performed in Australia each year isn't known, but one estimate published in 2005 suggested the figure to be around 70,000 to 80,000. This is because only South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory collect abortion statistics and only South Australia publishes this data.

Medicare data gives an indication of numbers, but doesn't distinguish between abortions and other medical procedures, such as the removal of a fetus that has already died. The estimated rate for Australia in 2003 was around 19.7 abortions per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 44 years.

International rates range from 7.7 in Germany to 90 in Eastern Europe, with a world average of 33–37 abortions per 1,000 women. These rates tend to reflect the attitude of each country to comprehensive sexuality education and effective contraception rather than the sexual behaviour of the people who live there.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 or the Action Centre (for young people aged under 25 years) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9660 4700
- Pregnancy Advisory Service, the Women's Tel. (03) 8345 3063
- Contraceptive and Counselling Clinic, Monash Medical Centre Tel. (03) 9594 2574 or (03) 9594 2445
- Women's health centre.

## Things to remember

- Abortion is one of the most common surgical procedures performed in Australia.
- Medical (non-surgical) options include the drug mifepristone, also known as RU486 or 'the abortion pill'.
- A number of studies show most Australians support the idea of safe and legal abortion.
- A woman seeking abortion is most likely to be aged in her 20s, single, childless, well educated and employed.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Family Planning Victoria

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