

## Abortion in Australia

In 1990, an estimated 23 per cent of all known pregnancies in Australia were terminated. This makes abortion one of the most common surgical procedures in the country, with around 80,000 women undergoing abortion every year. Our current ratio of one abortion in every four pregnancies is an improvement over the estimated one in three recorded in Australia in the 1930s.

Comparatively speaking, Australia's abortion rate is reasonably low by international standards. For instance, the United States of America has a 30 per cent abortion rate, while countries such as the former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria have recorded abortion rates of over 50 per cent.

International research shows that women will still seek abortion, even if the procedure is illegal. Numerous studies have shown that the majority of Australians support the idea of safe and legal abortions.

### Legislation around Australia

Abortion laws are different in each Australian state and territory. Research has shown that the majority of Australians support the idea of safe and legal abortion. Yet some of the legislation remains vague and open to interpretation.

Ambiguous laws can mean that public sector services may be limited, particularly in rural areas, and doctors may be less inclined to train in abortion techniques for fear of legal action.

See contacts listed under **Where to get help** for information about how abortion is regulated in your state or territory.

### Typical profile

Around one in three Australian women will undergo an abortion. Unwanted pregnancy can affect any woman of childbearing age, but studies show that some women are at greater risk than others. The typical profile of a woman seeking abortion includes:

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

### One in two women were using contraception

It's often believed that only irresponsible women fall pregnant by accident. This is not true. Studies show that between half and two thirds of all women presenting for abortion were using contraception at the time. Significantly, some women using birth control pills were not aware that back-up contraception, such as condoms, needed to be used in cases of vomiting or diarrhoea.

Even when used strictly according to the directions, no form of contraception is guaranteed to prevent pregnancy every time. Women who are not in permanent relationships are more likely to fall pregnant by accident, because a woman having irregular sex is less inclined to use regular contraception, like birth control pills.

### Sex is not always voluntary

Another common fallacy is that a woman is in control of her body at all times, and should therefore be able to prevent an accidental pregnancy. However, a woman's decision to have sexual intercourse is not always voluntary. Circumstances such as coercion, manipulation, rape and alcohol use can deny a woman the opportunity to exercise her free will and take contraceptive precautions.

### Abortion doesn't automatically harm fertility

A safely performed abortion with no complications doesn't reduce a woman's future fertility. This belief may be a hangover from days when abortion was illegal, and 'backyard' procedures carried considerable risks, including infection. Currently, abortion is one of the safest medical procedures in Australia. It is 10 times safer than childbirth, and around 200 times safer than an appendicectomy (surgery to remove appendix).

### **Emotional impact**

Studies show that most women who have an abortion don't suffer any subsequent psychological or emotional problems. Women who do experience guilt, depression and grief tend to be those who were coerced into the operation by partners or family.

Australian research indicates that a woman is more likely to suffer emotionally if she feels the decision to terminate was, in some way, not fully hers to make. Legislation that requires a woman to 'convince' the doctor of her eligibility for the procedure can cause distress, since the final decision rests with the medical profession, and not the woman herself.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- The Action Centre (for young people less than 25 years) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9654 4766
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100
- Women's health centre

### **Things to remember**

- Abortion is one of Australia's most common surgical procedures, with around 80,000 women undergoing abortion every year.
- Numerous studies have shown that the majority of Australians support the idea of safe and legal abortions.
- A woman seeking abortion is most likely to be aged in her 20s, single, childless, well educated and employed.
- Abortion laws are different in each Australian state and territory.

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

Family Planning Victoria

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