
Abortion

Summary

- Abortion is one of the most common surgical procedures performed in Australia – around one in three Australian women will have the procedure in their lifetime.
 - Medication (non-surgical) options include the drug mifepristone, also known as RU486 or 'the abortion pill'.
 - Research shows most Australians support safe and legal abortion.
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Abortion is the termination (end) of a pregnancy. Most abortions are performed during the first trimester of pregnancy (up to 12 weeks), but some may be performed in the second trimester (12 to 24 weeks) or, in rare circumstances, in the third trimester (24 to 36 weeks).

Research shows that most Australians support safe and legal abortion. Around one in three Australian women will have the procedure in their lifetime. It's important for all women have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions.

Types of abortion

Two types of abortion are currently available:

- Surgical abortion is a low-risk procedure most commonly used for first trimester (seven to 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.
- Medication abortion is a low-risk alternative to surgery that is used for terminating pregnancies earlier than seven to nine weeks (depending on the clinic). Mifepristone (RU486), also known as 'the abortion pill', is the most widely known medication used for this procedure. It is available in many 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. The *Abortion Law Reform Act 2008* decriminalised termination of pregnancy and set out guidelines for when abortion can take place. Any woman can attend an abortion clinic in Victoria and have an abortion until she is 24 weeks pregnant. However, services for pregnancies beyond 17 weeks are limited.

Abortion after 24 weeks is legal, but is not 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 is necessary to preserve the life of the pregnant woman, even if they object to abortion in general.

Abortion facts and myths

There are many 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.

Facts about abortion include:

- 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 is illegal.
- Over half of all women who have had an abortion were using contraception when they became pregnant. According to World Health Organization estimates, if all couples used effective contraception 100 per cent of the time, there would still be six million unplanned pregnancies every year.
- Women do not 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 will not reduce a woman's future fertility.
- Abortion does not cause ongoing emotional distress for most women.
- There is no evidence that abortion causes breast cancer.
- Mifepristone (RU486) is registered for use in more than 50 countries worldwide and millions of women have been prescribed the drug since it was first used in 1988.

Research shows that at the time of an unplanned pregnancy:

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

Australian abortion laws vary

Several studies show most Australians support safe and legal abortion. However, laws vary between Australian states and territories, which can be confusing. Most of the variation concerns 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.

Abortion rates in Australia

The exact number of abortions performed in Australia each year is not known. This is because only South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory collect abortion statistics.

Medicare data gives an indication of abortion numbers, but does not distinguish between abortions and other medical procedures, such as the removal of a foetus that has already died. Medication abortion numbers cannot be estimated from Medicare. The estimated abortion rate for Australia in 2003 was 19.7 abortions per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 44 years.

International rates range from 7.7 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 per year in Germany to 90 in Eastern Europe, with a world average of 35. These rates may 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. (03) 9257 0100 or freecall 1800 013 952
- Family Planning Victoria's Action Centre (for people aged under 25) Tel. (03) 9660 4700 or freecall 1800 013 952
- Women's health centre

Things to remember

- Abortion is one of the most common surgical procedures performed in Australia – around one in three

Australian women will have the procedure in their lifetime.

- Medication (non-surgical) options include the drug mifepristone, also known as RU486 or 'the abortion pill'.
- Research shows most Australians support safe and legal abortion.

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Family Planning Victoria

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