

ABORTION – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Everyone who is pregnant has decisions to make. It might be unexpected. You might have many different feelings. It may be news that you're excited and happy to get. It might be a shock at first but something you are happy with. It may be unwanted news.

You have a number of options.

You can:

- Continue the pregnancy and keep the baby
- Continue the pregnancy and think about adoption or fostering
- End the pregnancy by having an abortion – if you are legally able to do so. (See the box on The Law on page 7)

If you want to know more about abortion, and get some help to start making decisions, read this booklet.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M PREGNANT?

Pregnancy can happen when a man and a woman have vaginal sex without using condoms, or other forms of contraception, or if the contraception fails e.g. the condom breaks or splits, or the woman forgets to take a pill, or has had diarrhoea or been vomiting. There's a small chance pregnancy can happen if sperm gets near the vaginal entrance, without having sex.

Conception happens when a sperm fertilises an egg.

There may be signs of pregnancy from one week after conception.

These can include:

- Late period, or lighter or shorter than normal
- Tiredness
- Tender, swollen breasts
- Peeing more than usual
- Nausea or vomiting
- Mood changes
- Food cravings
- Feeling bloated or period-like cramps.

If you've been having sex and you have any of these signs you should get a pregnancy test as quickly as possible. You can go to a Family Planning clinic or your doctor (GP) for a free test, or buy a pregnancy test kit at supermarkets or chemists, or midwife services.

Test kits range in price from \$8.00 through to \$30.00 in supermarkets and chemists, and are reliable so long as the instructions are followed carefully.

If you're going to Family Planning or your doctor for a test you'll be asked the date of the first day of your last period. This helps determine how many weeks pregnant you could be.

If the test result is negative and you don't want to get pregnant you should check out your contraceptive options at a Family Planning clinic or with your doctor (GP).

A positive test means that you are pregnant.

If your pregnancy is a shock to you it's not unusual to want to ignore the pregnancy... but it won't go away. You will need to make some decisions.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION PILL?

The Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP) only prevents a pregnancy from occurring. It does not cause an abortion.

The ECP can only be taken up to 5 days after sex. It is most effective if it's taken within 12 hours of sex, and is also quite effective up to 72 hours after sex.

You can get the ECP on prescription by going to a Family Planning clinic or seeing a doctor, or you can buy it from a chemist.

PREGNANT? THINGS TO THINK ABOUT...

It's normal to have many different feelings if you have an unplanned pregnancy. You might feel frightened, shocked, upset, lonely. You might feel confused, or excited.

It might be difficult to decide what to do.

Some of these questions may help you make decisions.

- What do I want out of my life?
- How would a pregnancy and baby change my plans?
- What about my education and career?
- How do I feel about being responsible for a child?
- Is this a good time to have a baby?
- Do I have the skills to cope with a child?
- Will I tell the guy? Will he help me whatever I decide to do?

- What if the guy that I got pregnant to is not someone I like or care about? Do I want to remain connected to him through a child?
- Are we ready to be parents?
- Will I tell my family/whānau? Will they help me?
- If I have the baby who will help me? Where will I live? Where will the money come from?
- How do I feel about adoption or guardianship?
- How do I feel about having an abortion?
- Do I really understand my options?
- Have I given myself a chance to think things through?

TALK TO SOMEONE WHO CAN HELP

Before you make a decision you may want to talk to someone else. Choose someone you can trust and who will listen to you. This could be your partner, a trusted friend, whānau or family member. If you're living at home it could be very helpful to talk to your parents/family/whānau about the issues. Counsellors, doctors and nurses can also be very helpful.

Young people told us that if they were faced with this decision they would most likely talk to their friends, a Family Planning Clinic and their partner.

Remember: it's not OK to be pressured into making a decision about continuing the pregnancy, keeping the baby, giving it up, or having an abortion. The final decision must be yours. No one else can make you have an abortion, or force you to have and keep a baby.

Spend time thinking and talking through your choices so that you make a decision that is right for you.

Whatever decision you make it is important to then act quickly so that you can seek an abortion ASAP or begin maternity care.

Here are the facts....

AGE

Whatever your age you have the legal right to choose what you want to do about your pregnancy, including seeking an abortion, so long as you are considered competent to really understand.

There is no legal age limit on seeking or having an abortion. This means that a woman or girl of any age can consent (agree) to an abortion - or refuse to have one, as long as she is "competent" - able to really understand.

Girls under 16 do not need to tell their parents or get their permission to have an abortion.

If you are a teenager it is a good idea to talk to a parent or another trusted adult. If you choose to seek an abortion, it is good to have adult support.

A woman does not need the agreement of her partner before having an abortion. The man has no legal right to be informed (told) of your decision. He cannot force his partner to have an abortion.

Many men want to share in the decision, but the decision is yours.

Abortion services are confidential. Doctors, nurses and other health workers are not allowed to give out information about you without your consent (agreement) unless they think that you are in danger.

WHEN CAN I HAVE AN ABORTION?

The majority of abortions in New Zealand are carried out within the first 10 weeks of pregnancy.

The first step is seeing a doctor – your family doctor (GP), another GP, school doctor, or a Family Planning doctor. You will have an examination, tests and often an ultrasound.

Your doctor will arrange for you to see two doctors called certifying consultants. If you ask your doctor about having an abortion and the doctor won't arrange for you to see the consultants because of their personal beliefs, you can go to another doctor.

Doctors and other staff in abortion clinics are trained not to judge you.

The first consultant doctor will ask you

questions about your health and your decision to seek an abortion and will talk about what will happen. They might examine you or arrange for you to have an ultrasound.

THE LAW

The law in New Zealand says that it is legal to have an abortion if two certifying consultants agree that this pregnancy would seriously harm your mental or physical health or that your baby would have a serious disability.

The consultants may also consider your age and whether the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest (sex with a blood relative.)

If you are more than 20 weeks pregnant different criteria applies. Your doctor will be able to tell you about this.

You will also be offered the chance to talk to a counsellor before making your final decision.

Of the abortions performed in New Zealand 98-99% of all abortions in NZ are performed under the grounds of serious danger to the mental health of the woman.

ABORTION

What you need to know

The second consultant is usually the person who will carry out the abortion procedure.

You can change your mind about having the procedure at any time before it takes place.

Before you have your abortion procedure you will be given information about what to expect, what to bring, how long it will take, and how to take care of yourself.

You might find it very helpful to bring someone with you for support.

Abortion is safest if it's carried out in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

If you decide to have an abortion it is important to act quickly and see a doctor to request an abortion referral.

DOES ANYONE HAVE TO KNOW?

It is your decision who you tell about your procedure. That includes your partner, and parents. If you are referred from a Family Planning clinic then your GP will not be informed unless you ask that they are.

WHERE CAN I HAVE AN ABORTION?

All District Health Boards (DHBs), the boards which run hospitals and many other health services, have to provide access to abortion services. This may be in your local hospital or clinic, or they may organise for you to travel to another hospital in a different part of the country.

The way services are run may differ between DHBs.

There are different methods of abortion. (See the box What is Abortion? on page 9.)

Not all of these methods are available everywhere in New Zealand.

WHAT IS ABORTION?

Sometimes called termination of pregnancy, an abortion is when the pregnancy is ended.

The pregnancy is removed from the uterus (sometimes called the womb).

There are different types of abortion procedures. The one used depends on how long you have been pregnant. At some stages of pregnancy a woman has options to choose from.

EARLY ABORTION PROCEDURES

Early Medical Abortion (EMA)

This type of abortion is like an early miscarriage. It can be done in the first 9 weeks of pregnancy. This requires two separate visits to take two medicines. The first medicine is called mifepristone and it blocks the pregnancy hormone that is necessary for the pregnancy to continue. The second medicine, a prostaglandin, is taken 1 - 2 days later. This causes the uterus to expel the pregnancy, usually within 4 to 6 hours.

What's the difference between Early Medical Abortion and the ECP?

The Emergency Contraceptive Pill stops a pregnancy from occurring. The Early Medical Abortion medicines end a pregnancy that has already begun.

Surgical abortion

This is vacuum aspiration or suction termination, and is usually used between 7 - 15 weeks of pregnancy.

The woman is given either a local or general anaesthetic. A small tube is inserted into the uterus via the vagina to remove the pregnancy by suction. It usually takes about 5 to 10 minutes. She goes home on the same day.

LATER ABORTION PROCEDURES

Medical abortion

This uses the same medicines as Early Medical Abortion but the doses are stronger and it takes longer. It is similar to having a later miscarriage. The woman may need to stay in hospital overnight.

Surgical dilation and evaluation (D&E)

This is used after 15 weeks of pregnancy. The woman's cervix is gently stretched so that forceps and a suction tube can go into the uterus. It takes 10 to 20 minutes and needs a general anaesthetic. The woman may need to stay in hospital overnight.

WHEN CAN I HAVE AN ABORTION?

The earlier in your pregnancy the safer the procedure is.

There is no upper time limit in New Zealand law. However, abortions for pregnancies over 20 weeks are very rare.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

Abortion is free for New Zealand residents. Sometimes there is a cost to have an ultrasound scan.

People who are not NZ legal residents' have to pay. Costs vary, depending on where they get the service.

If you are a New Zealand resident and your local District Health Board (DHB) doesn't provide an abortion service in your local hospitals the DHB may pay for your travel.

DOES IT HURT?

All methods have at least some pain similar to strong period pain. You will be given more information about types of abortion and how to deal with the discomfort and pain.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER AN ABORTION?

You will be given written information about what to expect, and a phone number to ring for help.

You will be asked to have a free check up within two weeks.

You could experience bleeding for up to three weeks afterwards.

After a surgical abortion the bleeding should be similar to a period. It may be much heavier after a medical abortion. You could have pain similar to period cramps. Painkillers can help to relieve this pain.

Some women experience strong emotions after having an abortion. Everyone is different. You might feel relief, anger, regret, freedom, guilt, sadness. These feelings may come and go.

There are counsellors who specialise in working with women who have had an abortion - it can be very useful to talk through your feelings with one of them.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE RISKS WITH HAVING AN ABORTION?

Abortion is a very safe procedure but as with any medical or surgical procedure there are risks.

Abortion has fewer risks than pregnancy and childbirth.

It is safer to have an abortion before you are 12 weeks pregnant.

One in 20 women will have a problem after an abortion. The most common risk is the risk of infection. This is rare. You are most at risk of getting an

infection in the two weeks after your abortion. For the first two weeks after an abortion have showers rather than baths, use sanitary pads rather than tampons, and don't go swimming.

Infections are easy to treat. Take any antibiotics the doctors give you. If infections are left untreated they can cause a lot of damage.

Rare problems can include too much bleeding (haemorrhaging), damage to the cervix and uterus.

In some cases other internal organs may be affected. The risk is extremely small.

If you have any of these symptoms get medical help: high temperature, bleeding that soaks through 2 pads an hour for 2 or more hours, smelly discharge.

DOES HAVING AN ABORTION MAKE IT HARDER TO HAVE BABIES IN THE FUTURE?

It is very unlikely that having an abortion will stop you becoming pregnant in the future.

If you do not have any problems or injuries with your abortion then having an abortion does not reduce your chances of getting pregnant or having a baby in the future. Problems are not common.

There is some evidence that you may have a very small increased risk of miscarriage or early birth if you get pregnant again.

DOES ABORTION CAUSE BREAST CANCER?

There is no scientific evidence that shows that having an abortion increases your risk of developing breast cancer.

DOES HAVING AN ABORTION AFFECT YOU EMOTIONALLY FOR A VERY LONG TIME?

Every woman is different. Most women who have chosen to have an abortion are relieved after the procedure.

If you are sure about your decision and the reasons for having an abortion then you are less likely to have negative or long term emotional effects.

DOES IT ALWAYS WORK?

Very rarely the abortion procedure may not remove the pregnancy. This means you will need more treatment. It is more common with medical abortion and early surgical abortion.

It is important to have a check up after the abortion to ensure that if there are any problems they are treated immediately. It is also important to talk about contraception options.

WHEN COULD I HAVE SEX AGAIN?

It is best not to have sex for at least two weeks after the abortion. If you do have sex use a condom, with lube, to protect yourself from infection.

Some young women think that they'll never have sex again, but this is very unlikely. It is better to be prepared.

CONTRACEPTION

You can get pregnant within 2 weeks of having an abortion. You should begin to use contraception immediately after your abortion.

It's really important that you start using contraception as soon as possible after the abortion.

Your doctors and nurses will be able to give you advice.

WHAT ABOUT THE GUYS?

Unplanned pregnancy can be difficult for men.

Men may feel strongly about the woman and her pregnancy and feel they have a right to be informed or involved. Legally they don't have any rights to make decisions about continuing or terminating the pregnancy.

Deciding to seek an abortion is the woman's choice. A man shouldn't pressure the woman to do something she does not want to do, whether that is to continue the pregnancy or to have an abortion.

Men who are named as the father of a baby are legally and financially responsible for that child, until the child reaches his or her 19th birthday. If the man is under 18 years of age the financial responsibility falls on his parents.

Men may feel excluded, which can result in strong and uncomfortable feelings. They may be frustrated, angry, or hurt if they don't agree with the woman's final decision.

If this is the case, men can look for help and support to come to terms with this.

Men can share responsibility for contraception, and use condoms. Using condoms and lube during sex is especially important for the first few weeks after an abortion, to help prevent the woman from getting infections.

