

Resource 16 (Activity 7)

Abortion Information Sheet (1 of 6)

What does 'abortion' mean?

'Abortion' refers to the foetus being removed from the uterus early, whether this happens naturally, such as with a miscarriage, or is intentionally removed. Nowadays, the word 'abortion' is used to refer only to the conscious removal of a foetus using chemicals or surgery.

Most people have an opinion about abortion, and a lot of campaigns happen in many countries around this issue. They generally fall into two categories:

- 'Pro-Life' supporters: These people believe that the focus should be on the rights of the unborn child.
- 'Pro-Choice' supporters: These people believe that it is up to the mother to decide whether she wants to end her pregnancy or not.

What happens?

Abortions can be performed in different ways:

Before 9 weeks of pregnancy: The Abortion Pill

Two different drugs are taken over three or four visits to a clinic. These cause a miscarriage. There is a high risk of side effects for people with various medical conditions so careful medical advice is needed before using this method.

Before 12 weeks of pregnancy: Suction Tube

A suction tube is inserted into the uterus and the foetus is sucked away.

12 – 24 weeks of pregnancy: Surgical Abortion

An operation is performed to remove the foetus through the vagina. The cervix is dilated, and a general anaesthetic is given. There is a risk of damage to the uterus, infection, painful cramps or an incomplete abortion.

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How developed is a foetus at different stages of a pregnancy?

A pregnancy is usually measured from the date of the last period, until 40 weeks after this date. However, fertilisation usually takes place about two weeks after the last period.

Fertilisation

This usually happens within a day of sexual intercourse. The genetic make up of the person is present. This information determines gender, eye colour, hair colour, facial features and influences characteristics such as intelligence and personality.

Three Weeks after Fertilisation

The eyes, spinal cord and brain are forming.

Four Weeks after Fertilisation

The heart is beating and internal organs such as the lungs are beginning to develop.

Seven Weeks after Fertilisation

Muscles and nerves begin working together.

Nine Weeks after Fertilisation

The foetus is now over 90% formed. It can move freely.

Ten Weeks after Fertilisation

All parts of the brain and spinal cord are formed. The heart pumps blood to every part of the body. The foetus makes facial expressions and is sensitive to touch.

14 Weeks after Fertilisation

The foetus makes coordinated movements of the arms and legs.

18 Weeks after Fertilisation

The part of the brain related to reasoning and memory is fully developed.

24 Weeks after Fertilisation

Can taste, and can hold onto a moving object.

28 Weeks after Fertilisation

If born and given specialised care, the survival rate is more than 95%.

38 Weeks after Fertilisation

Average time when humans are born.

"Abortion Facts". By James D. Agresti. *Just Facts*, October 20, 2002. Revised 2/5/08.
<http://www.justfacts.com/abortion.asp>

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What about abortion in Northern Ireland?

Abortions are illegal in Northern Ireland except where necessary to save the life of the mother, or where continuance of the pregnancy would involve serious risk of injury to her physical or mental health. In 2006, 80 medical abortions were carried out in Northern Ireland.

If a foetus is found to have abnormalities, it is illegal to perform an abortion.

In 2006, 1295 women travelled to England or Wales for abortions.

A debate took place in June 2000 in the Northern Ireland Assembly on the issue of abortion law in Northern Ireland and it was agreed there would be no change to abortion law without the consent of all the main political parties.

What about abortion in the rest of the World?

The number of induced abortions worldwide in 2003 was nearly 42 million. About one in five pregnancies worldwide end in abortion.

For every 1,000 women of childbearing age (15-44) worldwide, 29 were estimated to have had an induced abortion in 2003.

Most abortions occur in developing countries - 35 million annually, compared with seven million in developed countries - a disparity that largely reflects the relative population distribution. On the other hand, a woman's likelihood of having an abortion is similar whether she lives in a developed or developing region; in 2003, there were 26 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44 in developed countries compared with 29 per 1,000 in developing countries.

Between 1995 and 2005 17 countries liberalised their laws to increase access to safe abortion: Albania, Benin, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Chad, Colombia, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Nepal, Portugal, Saint Lucia, South Africa, Swaziland, Switzerland and Togo. Three countries tightened restrictions on abortion: El Salvador, Nicaragua and Poland.

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Table 1

Incident and Rates. Global and regional estimates of included abortion, 1995 and 2003				
Region and Subregion	No of abortions (millions)		Abortion rate*	
	1995	2003	1995	2003
World	45.6	41.6	35	29
Developed Countries Excluding Eastern Europe	10.0 3.8	6.6 3.5	39 20	26 19
Developing Countries** Excluding China	35.5 24.9	35.0 26.4	34 33	29 30
Estimates by region				
Africa	5.0	5.6	33	29
Asia	26.8	25.9	33	29
Europe	7.7	4.3	48	28
Latin America	4.2	4.1	37	31
Northern America	1.5	1.5	22	21
Oceania	0.1	0.1	21	17

* Abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44

** Those within Africa, the Americas, excluding Canada and the United States of America, Asia, excluding Japan and Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand.

The World Health Organization, http://who.int/reproductivehealth/unsafe_abortion/induced_abortion_worldwide.pdf

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Table 2

Grounds in which abortion is legally permitted in 193 countries, 2001										
	To save the woman's life	To preserve physical health	To preserve mental health	Rape or Incest	Fetal impairment	Economic or social reasons	On request			
All Countries (n = 193)										
Permitted	189	122	120	83	76	63	52			
Not Permitted	4	71	73	110	117	130	141			
Developed Countries (n = 48)										
Permitted	46	42	41	39	39	36	31			
Not Permitted	2	6	7	9	9	12	17			
Developing Countries (n = 145)										
Permitted	143	80	79	44	37	27	21			
Not Permitted	2	65	66	101	108	118	124			

Source United Nations¹²

United Nations Population Division. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. World Abortion policies. New York, United Nations, 2001 (wallchart).

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Safe and Unsafe Abortion

The World Health Organisation defines unsafe abortion as a procedure for terminating an unintended pregnancy carried out either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment that does not conform to minimal medical standards or both.

Worldwide, 48% of all induced abortions are unsafe. However, in developed regions, nearly all abortions (92%) are safe, whereas in developing countries, more than half (55%) are unsafe.

An estimated five million women are hospitalised each year for treatment of abortion-related complications, such as haemorrhage and sepsis. Complications due to unsafe abortion procedures account for an estimated 13% of maternal deaths worldwide, or 67,000 per year.

The World Health Organization, http://who.int/reproductivehealth/unsafe_abortion/induced_abortion_worldwide.pdf

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Reasons Why Some People Want An Abortion

Below is a list of possible reasons why someone may want to have an abortion. For each statement, decide whether you think that reason is OK, not OK, or whether you are unsure, and then tick the appropriate box. There are some blank boxes for you to add some other reasons if you want.

Reason	It's OK	It's not OK	Not Sure
I'm not married/don't have a partner			
I'm still studying at university			
I don't want to be a parent			
I don't like children at all			
I can't afford to bring up a child			
The father of the child isn't interested			
I've other plans for my future - a child will get in the way			
I'm still at school (under 16 years old)			
I'm still at school (16 – 18 years old)			
People will look down on me for being pregnant			
I'll bring shame on my family			
I'm pregnant due to an affair with a married man			
My parents will throw me out and disown me			
I'm pregnant as a result of sexual abuse			
I'm pregnant as a result of being raped			
My life is at risk because of the pregnancy			
My child will be physically disabled and need lifelong care			
My child will be mentally disabled and need lifelong care			