

# Abortion (Termination of Pregnancy)

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This factsheet addresses the decision to have an abortion and the effects it may have on a woman with a learning disability.

**This information is relevant to England and Wales.**

## Introduction

**What does the word abortion mean?**

**Is abortion legal?**

**How can a woman get an abortion?**

**What if you are not sure about having an abortion?**

**What happens if a woman with a learning disability seeks an abortion?**

**What other factors need to be considered?**

**What should happen before and after the abortion?**

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## Introduction

For many women, finding out that they are pregnant can be a very happy time, but for others it may be unwelcome news. If a woman does not want to have a baby, she may decide to have an abortion.

## What does the word abortion mean?

An abortion is the termination of a pregnancy. This means that the pregnancy is ended so that there will be no birth of a child. There are different ways and methods of having an abortion and a doctor or nurse will discuss this with the woman.

## Is abortion legal?

In England, Scotland and Wales abortion is legal up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. Two doctors must agree that the abortion is needed for one of the following reasons:

- To have the baby could harm the woman's mental or physical health.
- To have the baby could harm the mental or physical health of any children she already has.

An abortion is also legal at any time of the pregnancy if two doctors agree that:

- The abortion is needed to save the woman's life or to stop serious permanent harm to her mental or physical health.

- There is a high risk that the baby could be seriously disabled.

## How can a woman get an abortion?

Abortion care is available free through the NHS. Private clinics or hospitals charge for this service.

To get an abortion from the NHS, the woman needs to be referred by a doctor. This can be her own GP, or by a doctor at the **contraception** clinic (family planning clinic) or sexual health clinic. You don't have to be referred by a doctor if you choose to go private but there is a fee for this service and costs can vary.

## What if you are not sure about having an abortion?

To decide whether to have the baby or to have an abortion is not an easy decision to make. The woman may want to talk it over with her partner, family, friends or someone she feels close to or trusts. Her doctor can also refer her for counselling.

## What happens if a woman with a learning disability seeks an abortion?

If a woman with a learning disability is requesting an abortion, then a person skilled in counselling people with a learning disability could be found to support her. The woman needs to understand what an abortion is, and what the effects of having an abortion may have on her.

## What other factors need to be considered?

- Does the woman wish to keep her baby?
- Can the woman look after a baby?
- Is she facing pressure from relatives/carers/a partner?
- Is she being pressurised by professionals?
- Have support systems been looked at should she want to keep the baby?
- Would she wish to have the baby adopted? Does she understand what this means?

## What should happen before and after the abortion?

During the first appointment she should be given:

- The chance to talk things through, if she wants to.
- Information about the different types of abortion
- Information about the risks or harms associated with an ongoing pregnancy, childbirth or in having an abortion.
- A test to check the blood group and if medically required a check for **anaemia**.
- A consent form to sign.

She may:

- Need to have an **ultrasound scan**
- Have an vaginal examination
- Be offered a **cervical screening test**
- Be offered a check for sexually transmitted infections
- Be given the chance to talk about the type of **contraception** she may wish to use

after the abortion

After the abortion she should be offered:

- A telephone helpline number for advice on any problems that she may have.
- The chance to discuss contraception and be given contraception to use.
- A follow-up appointment to make sure all is well.
- The chance to talk about her feelings. After an abortion a woman may go through a range of feelings. She might feel sad, relieved or emotional. She may feel all, some, or none of these.

## Further information

- Information and any discussion between the woman and the health professional is **confidential** - unless there are reasons for concern such as harm or child protection issues.
  - The partner, or father of the child, has no legal rights and does not have to agree to the abortion but she may want to discuss the issue with him.
  - Waiting times are different and this depends on where a woman lives. From her first appointment, a woman should not have to wait more than 3 weeks. Women who have other medical problems may have to wait longer.
  - There may be some pain or discomfort after the abortion.
  - For most women abortion is safe, but it is not entirely risk-free. The doctor or nurse will discuss the risks that can occur during and after the abortion.
  - If it is important to not become pregnant again, **contraception** needs to start straight away after the abortion.
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## Key terms:

1. **Anaemia** - a condition where there are less blood cells in the blood.
2. **Ultrasound scan** - a special procedure called a scan that produces a picture or image of the baby in the womb.
3. **Contraception** - methods used to stop a woman becoming pregnant.
4. **Confidential** - information that is usually not told to anyone else.
5. **Cervical Screening Test** - a check to see if there are changes in the cells of the cervix which may lead to cancer if not treated.

**This document was approved by Natika H Halil (fpa - Family Planning Association) on 24/08/2009**

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