What Is Abortion?

An abortion is the ending of a pregnancy. This is done by removing the embryo or fetus from the uterus. Abortions can be done by either a surgical procedure or by taking a special medication that ends the pregnancy.

According to the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, abortion is legal in South Africa for anyone living in the country. It is legal for any reason in the first 12 weeks and under certain broad circumstances between 13 and 20 weeks. An abortion performed in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy usually involves taking some medication. After 12 weeks, it may require a surgical procedure.
**MEDICAL ABORTION**

**WHAT IS THE ABORTION PILL?**

Medical abortions are usually done within the first 12 weeks and is a safe and effective way to end an early pregnancy. The pregnant person takes pills that breaks down the lining of the uterus and makes it contract.

**HOW THE ABORTION PILL WORKS**

“Abortion pill” is the popular name for using two different medicines to end a pregnancy: mifepristone and misoprostol. The nurse or doctor will usually give you mifepristone first at the clinic or hospital.

*Mifepristone* blocks your body’s own progesterone. You’ll also get some antibiotics. You take the second medicine, misoprostol, 24-48 hours later, usually at home.

This medicine causes cramping and bleeding to empty the uterus. It’s kind of like having a really heavy, crampy period, and the process is very similar to an early miscarriage.

*Misoprostol* is the second drug taken usually within a day or so after taking mifepristone. Misoprostol tablets (which may be placed either into the vagina, between cheek and gum, or swallowed) cause the uterus to contract and empty. This ends the pregnancy.

In South Africa, misoprostol alone is currently the standard of care for medical termination of pregnancy within the public health sector.
About Surgical Abortions

At a clinic, you will be given medication to make you calm. In a hospital, you will be given a general anesthetic to make you unconscious.

During a surgical abortion, the doctor puts a speculum into the vagina to see the cervix (the opening into the uterus). The cervix is opened slightly and a small suction tube is placed inside. The inside of the uterus is then gently suctioned until the fetal tissue is gone. The entire procedure takes about 15 minutes.

Afterwards, you usually have some bleeding which can last up to 2 weeks. You will have to stay in the clinic or hospital for about 2 hours until staff are sure there are no complications.

When you’ve had a surgical abortion you should get antibiotics to prevent infection and pain medication to help you deal with any discomfort afterwards. The facility you go to must also have a recovery room where you can be monitored before going home.

Surgical Abortions are usually performed after the 12 week mark. Unlike a medical abortion, after 12 weeks you will need to be assisted by a doctor. You can access abortion after 12 weeks for these reasons: the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, mental and physical health reasons, or because it would negatively influence your socio-economic circumstances.

A vacuum aspiration is most commonly used between 12 and 14 weeks of pregnancy, while the dilation and evacuation method is often better for pregnancies that are further along. You may be given misoprostol during a surgical abortion. This is called priming and helps to widen the cervix and makes the procedure more comfortable.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHY DO PEOPLE CHOOSE MEDICAL ABORTION?

Which kind of abortion you choose all depends on your personal preference and situation. With medical abortion, some people like that you don’t need to have a procedure in a doctor’s office. You can have your medical abortion somewhere where you are comfortable, and it can largely be self-managed. You get to decide who you want to be with during your abortion, or you can go alone. Medical abortion is very safe and is similar to a miscarriage.

HOW LONG DO MEDICAL ABORTIONS TAKE?

It can take anywhere from about a day to 3-4 weeks from the time a person takes the first medication until the medical abortion is completed. The majority of people who take mifepristone will abort within four hours of using misoprostol. About 95% will have a complete abortion within a week. Some will take longer and may use additional doses of misoprostol.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS MEDICAL ABORTION?

Abortion pills very effective. For people who are 8 weeks pregnant or less, it works about 98 out of 100 times. From 8-9 weeks pregnant, it works about 96 out of 100 times. From 9-10 weeks, it works 93 out of 100 times. The abortion pill usually works, but if it doesn’t, your medical team can help you to complete the abortion.

HOW WILL I FEEL WHEN I GET AN ABORTION?

Everyone’s abortion story is unique and there is no ‘right’ way to feel about abortion. It can be a sad and difficult thing to go through, but research shows that most people who access abortion feel a sense of relief and empowerment and it does not have long-term mental health impacts. Whatever you feel, we can support you in getting help.

IS ABORTION SAFE?

Abortions are very safe when done by legal providers. The earlier the abortion is done, the lower the chance of any complications. It is important to remember that with any procedure there is always some risk of infection or bleeding. Be aware that there are many scams online and on posters that advertise legal abortions. Kwanele can help refer you to legal termination of pregnancy services.
This procedure must be done before the 7th week of pregnancy and is only available at certain clinics. It requires a number of visits to the clinic. A drug is injected into the hip muscle and stops the growth of the pregnancy. Another drug is put into the vagina to make the uterus contract and the embryo then comes out with some blood. This process can take a few days to 2 weeks. Blood tests may be necessary to ensure that some hormones have decreased and you are no longer pregnant. Sometimes the medication does not work and a surgical abortion is necessary.

Is an abortion painful?
Bodies are different and some people will find abortion more painful than others. During the abortion, either a local anesthetic (freezing of the cervix) or general anesthetic (making you unconscious) is given. You may have cramping (like a heavy menstrual period) for a short time. Extra medication is available for pain, if needed.

Will I be able to have children after having an abortion?
Yes. If you have had an abortion, you can get pregnant again and have a normal pregnancy in the future.

Are there other types of medical abortion?
This procedure must be done before the 7th week of pregnancy and is only available at certain clinics. It requires a number of visits to the clinic. A drug is injected into the hip muscle and stops the growth of the pregnancy. Another drug is put into the vagina to make the uterus contract and the embryo then comes out with some blood. This process can take a few days to 2 weeks. Blood tests may be necessary to ensure that some hormones have decreased and you are no longer pregnant. Sometimes the medication does not work and a surgical abortion is necessary.

Do teenagers need their parent’s consent?
According to the law, anyone over the age of 12 can access legal abortion without their parental/guardian consent. This is because many children would not access abortion safely if they have to tell their parents. Procedures can be performed as long as it is clear to the health professional staff that you understand what is happening and can give consent. It is helpful to tell an adult you trust. Hospitals, clinics and health insurance plans must keep all medical procedures confidential.

What can I expect after an abortion?
Be sure to follow the instructions given to you by the clinic or hospital. Bleeding can last from a few days to 3 weeks but the amount of blood lost is not large. You may only have spotting but for others the bleeding may be heavier. Sometimes there are clots which can cause cramping. Bleeding may stop and restart. Cramping similar to period cramps is normal after an abortion. Using a hot water bottle or massaging your belly can help to relieve cramps. Do not take aspirin as that may increase the bleeding. The clinic will tell you which pain medication you can use.
Abortion is free in government hospitals and clinics. Try to go as early as possible in case there is a waiting list. In private facilities like Marie Stopes, medical abortions cost around R2,000 in 2022. Surgical abortions cost from R2,000 to R6,500.

Medical aids must include voluntary abortion because it is listed as a minimum benefit established by the council for medical schemes. Consult your doctor for more information.

Absolutely. Womxn have been terminating pregnancies throughout history and research shows that even in countries where abortion is illegal, people still access it.

There is a lot of stigma around abortion and many people have strong beliefs for or against it. Research shows that people of all religions, backgrounds, cultures, and identities access abortion-despite what their community might believe.

Abortion is the decision of the pregnant person. It is a very common medical procedure that many people undergo often and unproblematically.

Whatever your choice, we can support you.

Pregnancy symptoms such as breast tenderness, nausea, and fatigue may last for a few days but should disappear by the second week after the procedure. You should be able to resume normal activities (such as work or school) the day after the abortion. You should avoid strenuous activity for a few days.

After an abortion, the cervix is slightly open, increasing the risk of infection

Do not insert anything into the vagina for the next two weeks. That is:
- no sexual intercourse
- use napkins instead of tampons
- shower only - no jacuzzis, baths or swimming

All registered medical schemes in South Africa are required to offer a set of defined benefits known as Prescribed Minimum Benefits (PMBs) to each and every one of its members.

IS ABORTION COMMON?

WHAT YOU SHOULD TO IF YOU EXPERIENCE UNUSUAL SYMPTOMS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

HOW MUCH DOES AN ABORTION COST?
Heavy bleeding, soaking one or more pads for 1 hour, body temperature above 38°C (100. °F) OR Chills lasting more than a day, severe abdominal pain, and bad-smelling vaginal discharge are all possible signs of an infection or other complications.

Call the doctor at the abortion clinic or go immediately to the emergency room of the hospital if you have any of these problems.

**WHAT ABOUT BIRTH CONTROL?**

After an abortion, you can get pregnant again if you had unprotected sex before your first period. Many clinics offer birth control methods before you leave, or you will need to see your doctor in the coming weeks to discuss which birth control method is right for you.

Your period should arrive within the next 6 weeks. If you started using the birth control pill, patch or ring, your period will start at the end of the first pack.

Remember that condoms prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV and hepatitis B.

**KNOW YOUR RIGHTS, KNOW YOUR OPTIONS**

Here’s what you need to know from.

The choice is and always will be yours. Your body, your choice. Social attitudes can make it difficult to know who to turn to. Especially if you don’t know where to safely perform the procedure. You may see many promotional flyers offer same day abortions for a little as R200, but chances are they may not be safe.

Women of all ages have the right to legal and safe abortions. It means that it doesn’t matter what age you are or what other people have to say. You can go to a government hospital or a public health clinic for free, safe abortion in South Africa. Private doctors and non-profit organizations trained and qualified to perform abortions are also legal and safe options.
**KNOW YOUR RIGHTS, KNOW YOUR OPTIONS**

You can contact the Department of Health via Government hospitals, designated private doctors and gynaecologists and non-profit organizations like Marie Stopes. Be aware that some individuals or organizations may discourage you from seeking an abortion.

Termination of pregnancy is free of charge at primary healthcare facilities and when referred up the line.

You can reach out to us here at Kwanele South Africa for any assistance you may need. Please visit our website at www.kwanelesouthafrica.org

The Marie Stopes website is also full of useful tips and facts. You can call them on 0800 11 77 85.

Some helpful websites:

- mariestopes.org.za
- centralwomensclinic.co.za
- genderjustice.org.za
- soulcity.org.za
- safe2choose.org
- bhekisisa.org