



Women Who Have Abortions

Unintended Pregnancy

Each year, almost half of all pregnancies among American women are unintended¹. About half of these unplanned pregnancies, 1.3 million each year, are ended by abortion^{1,2}.

There are many myths and misconceptions about who gets abortions, and why. The fact is that the women who have abortions come from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. If current rates continue, it is estimated that 35% of all women of reproductive age in America today will have had an abortion by the time they reach the age of 45³.

Measuring the Incidence of Abortion

The incidence of abortion can be tracked in two different ways. The first is simply to keep a tally of the total number of abortions obtained by women who fall into specified categories. Numbers tracked in this way are usually expressed as a percentage of all abortions provided in a year. Alternatively, the rate of abortion can be measured by calculating the total number of abortions obtained per 1,000 women who make up the total population in each category.

Age

Women between the ages of 15 and 19 account for about 19% of all abortions; women 20 to 24 account for another 33%; and about 25% of abortions are obtained by women who are 30 or older⁴. Calculating abortion rates, older teenagers and young adults have the highest abortion rates, while women younger than 15 and older than 35 have the lowest⁴.

Length of Pregnancy

Most abortions (88%) are obtained in the first trimester of pregnancy. In fact, over half of all abortions are obtained within the first 8 weeks. Fewer than 2% occur at 21 weeks or later⁵.

Education, Residence, and Income

Of the women obtaining abortions in 2000:

- 57% had some college education;
- 88% were from metropolitan areas; and
- 57% percent were low-income⁴.

Marital Status

Most women getting abortions (83%) are unmarried; 67% have never married, and 16% are separated, divorced, or widowed⁴. Married women are significantly less likely than unmarried women to resolve unintended pregnancies through abortion⁶.

Religion

Women who obtain abortions represent every religious affiliation. 13% of abortion patients describe themselves as born-again or Evangelical Christians⁴; while 22% of U.S. women are Catholic⁷, 27% of abortion patients say they are Catholics¹.

MYTH: Women are using abortion as a method of birth control.

In fact, half of all women getting abortions report that contraception was used during the month they became pregnant¹. Some of these couples had used the method improperly; some had forgotten or neglected to use it on the particular occasion they conceived; and some had used a contraceptive that failed. No contraceptive method prevents pregnancy 100% of the time.

If abortion were used as a primary method of birth control, a typical woman would have at least two or three pregnancies per year -- 30 or more during her lifetime.

In fact, most women who have abortions have had no previous abortions (52%) or only one previous abortion (26%)⁵. Considering that most women are fertile for over 30 years, and that birth control is not perfect, the likelihood of having one or two unintended pregnancies is very high.

MYTH: Women have abortions for selfish or frivolous reasons.

The decision to have an abortion is rarely simple. Most women base their decision on several factors, the most common being lack of money and/or unreadiness to start or expand their families due to existing responsibilities. Many feel that the most responsible course of action is to wait until their situation is more suited to childrearing; 66% plan to have children when they are older, financially able to provide necessities for them, and/or in a supportive relationship with a partner so their children will have two parents⁸. Others wanted to get pregnant but developed serious medical problems, learned that the fetus had severe abnormalities, or experienced some other personal crisis. About 13,000 women each year have abortions because they have become pregnant as a result of rape or incest¹.

MYTH: Women are often forced into having abortions they do not really want.

Some women say that pressure from a husband, partner, or parent was one of several reasons they chose abortion, but only about 1% give that reason as the "most important" one in making their decision⁹. Conversely, some women who do not want to continue their pregnancies are pressured to do so by family members, friends, or fear of social stigma. Pre-abortion options counseling is designed to determine whether a woman is fully comfortable with her abortion decision, and if she is not, she is encouraged to wait until she has had a chance to consider her options more fully.

MYTH: Many women come to regret their abortions later.

Research indicates that relief is the most common emotional response following abortion, and that psychological distress appears to be greatest before, rather than after, an abortion.

There are undoubtedly some women who, in hindsight, wish that they had made different choices, and the majority would prefer never to have become pregnant when the circumstances were not right for them. When a wanted pregnancy is ended (for medical reasons, for example) women may experience a sense of loss and grief. As with any major change or decision involving loss, a crisis later in life sometimes leads to a temporary resurfacing of sad feelings surrounding the abortion. Women at risk for poor post-

abortion adjustment are those who do not get the support they need, or whose abortion decisions are actively opposed by people who are important to them¹⁰. Learn more about post-abortion issues at http://www.prochoice.org/about_abortion/facts/post_abortion_issues.html

References

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- 8 Henshaw SK and Kost K. Abortion patients in 1994-1995: Characteristics and contraceptive use. *Family Planning Perspectives* 1996; 28(4): 140-147 & 158.
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Statistical information in this fact sheet is based on research by the Alan Guttmacher Institute and other members of the National Abortion Federation.

For More Information

For information or referrals to qualified abortion providers, call the National Abortion Federation's toll-free hotline: 1-800-772-9100. Weekdays: 8:00A.M.- 9:00P.M. Saturdays: 9:00A.M.- 5:00P.M. Eastern time.

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