



# Choosing Between a Medical and Surgical Abortion

## Medical Abortion

**How does it work?** Methotrexate is used to stop the pregnancy from growing. You then use misoprostol pills at home that cause your uterus to contract and push out the pregnancy tissue.

**How far along can the pregnancy be?** It can be up to seven weeks from the first day of your last period.

**How long does it take for the abortion to be complete?** Most women need two visits including the required one-week follow-up. Some women may need a third visit. 80% of medical abortions will be completed within the first week. Bleeding usually starts 1-12 hours after using the misoprostol and may be heavy for 4-8 hours. You may continue to have some bleeding or spotting for a few weeks. There is about a 20% chance of a delayed reaction. This does not mean that surgery is necessary but can make the process take longer as you may require more medication or time to pass the tissue.

**How painful is it?** It varies from mild to very strong cramping, at its worse when you are actually passing the tissue. You will receive medications to take at home to help manage pain. Milder cramps may continue for several days to several weeks.

**How much will I bleed?** Heavy bleeding and clots are common during the abortion process. Afterwards, you may have some spotting and/or bleeding up to your next period.

**Can the abortion fail?** One to two percent of the time the pregnancy will continue to grow and a surgical abortion is necessary. If you are in the 20% of women that are having a delayed reaction (the pregnancy has stopped but you have not had bleeding) you may choose to take more of the misoprostol pills or have surgery to complete the process.

**What are the possible complications?** Methotrexate and misoprostol have been formally studied and used safely. The risk of excessive bleeding or serious infection is very low. Some women may be allergic to the medications.

**What are common side effects?** Many women have no side effects. You may experience mild or strong effects including nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, dizziness, fever or chills.

## Surgical Abortion

**How does it work?** A doctor uses gentle suction to remove the pregnancy and blood from inside the uterus.

**How far along can the pregnancy be?** This will depend on what clinic or hospital you go to. In general, a surgical abortion can be done as early as around five weeks from the first day of your last period up to 20 weeks (and longer in certain circumstances). Most are done between 5 and 10 weeks of pregnancy.

**How long does it take for the abortion to be complete?** Most women only require one visit. The actual procedure usually takes less than eight minutes.

**How painful is it?** Some women experience mild to very strong cramping for a few minutes during the abortion procedure and for a short time after. Medications such as local anesthetic and conscious sedation will be offered to help manage pain. Milder cramps may continue for several days.

**How much will I bleed?** There is often not much bleeding immediately after procedure. Some women begin to bleed three to seven days afterwards. Bleeding can continue for up to several weeks, but is usually less than a period.

**Can the abortion fail?** There is about a one in 300 chance of needing the procedure repeated because of blood clots forming or tissue remaining in the uterus. A pregnancy continuing is extremely rare.

**What are the possible complications?** Surgical abortion has been formally studied for over 25 years. Injury to the uterus is very rare in the first trimester. Excessive bleeding is very rare. Infection or needing a re-suction happens in less than one percent of cases.

**What are common side effects?** Many women have no side effects. Some women have dizziness, nausea or vomiting.

**Are there emotional issues specific to this method?** Some women feel anxious in a medical setting or with the idea of surgery.

**Can it treat an ectopic (tubal) pregnancy?** No, but the ultrasound done before a surgical abortion often detects a possible ectopic pregnancy.

## Medical Abortion

### Are there emotional issues specific to this method?

Some women are anxious waiting for the abortion process to complete. Viewing the pregnancy tissue can also be difficult for some.

**Can it treat an ectopic (tubal) pregnancy?** Methotrexate is the best treatment for early ectopic pregnancies.

### What are the advantages of this method?

- Effective and safe for very early pregnancies.
- Does not require anesthesia, instruments or vacuum aspiration.
- Induces a miscarriage-like process, so if you need someone in your life to think it is a miscarriage this may be the best option.
- Being at home instead of a clinic during the actual abortion may seem more comfortable and private.
- Medications leave your system within a few days.

**What are the disadvantages of this method?** The process takes longer than a surgical abortion. It is not completely predictable – there is some uncertainty about when you will bleed and pass the pregnancy. Failure rates are higher than with a surgical abortion. Bleeding can be very heavy and last longer than with a surgical abortion. Cramping can also be strong and last longer than with a surgical abortion (although this varies). At least two visits are required and sometimes more.

**Who should not use this method?** If it is more than seven weeks from your last period, you are on blood thinners, or have an allergy to the medications, blood clotting problems, active liver or renal disease, severe anemia, uncontrolled seizures or inflammatory bowel disease.

**How much does it cost?** If you have BC medical (MSP), medical abortion is covered in British Columbia. However, there is usually a cost of about \$100 for the medications (this can sometimes be covered by extended health plans). If you do not have BC medical it is around \$500 for the abortion and medications. There may also be extra fees (for example, for blood tests when necessary).

**Where is it available?** In Vancouver, medical abortion is available at the Willow Women's Clinic and in Victoria, at the Vancouver Island Women's Clinic. In some communities it may be available through local doctors – call the Pregnancy Options Line (1-888-875-3163) to learn more.

## Surgical Abortion

### What are the advantages of this method?

- Quick, predictable, and over in a few minutes.
- Highly successful. Effective and safe for early pregnancies as well as when done later in a pregnancy.
- Usually less bleeding and cramping for less time than with a medical abortion.
- Performed by a doctor with support of medical staff on site (as well as often counselling staff).
- If you need to conceal a pregnancy/abortion altogether, this may be the best option.
- Involves less medications than a medical abortion.

### What are the disadvantages of this method?

A doctor must insert instruments inside the vagina and uterus. Anesthetics and drugs to manage pain during the procedure may cause side effects (serious problems are rare). There are possible complications, although they occur in less than one percent of cases. It may not be done as early in the pregnancy as with a medical abortion, depending on the doctor or clinic (however, some clinics do surgical abortions for very early pregnancies). It cannot end an ectopic pregnancy.

**Who should not use this method?** Some medical conditions or allergies to local anesthesia may require that a surgical abortion happen in a hospital setting.

**How much does it cost?** If you have BC medical (MSP), surgical abortion is fully covered in British Columbia. If you do not have coverage it is \$500 plus any additional fees (for example, for blood tests when necessary).

**Where is it available?** Surgical abortions are available at most abortion clinics (to which you can self-refer) or at a hospital (for which you need a doctor's referral).

## Both Methods

**Can I still have children later in life?** Abortion does not affect future pregnancies and fertility returns immediately unless there is an extremely rare, serious complication.

**How will I be affected emotionally?** Most women do not regret their decision or have serious depression after an abortion. Most people feel a sense of relief afterwards, although it is normal to have mixed or difficult emotions too. It is important to have support. If you are feeling conflicted about your decision or having difficulties after an abortion, counselling may help.