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# Health@Heart

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## Abortion Risks

My main objective in writing this weekly column is to play an active role in public health education campaign. I strongly believe that a well-informed community is a healthier society, resulting in a stronger and a more prosperous country.

In this issue today, we provide medical answers (devoid of our own personal and religious biases) to some of the questions sent in by our readers about this highly-charged and controversial procedure.

While the decision to have abortion performed is clouded by so many complicated issues, personal, social, religious, political, philosophical, the risks and possible medical complications of abortion are even more complex and intricate. Hopefully, the scientific information we give in this article will educate, guide and benefit our readers and their family and friends.

### What is abortion?

Abortion is the spontaneous or intentional termination of conception or pregnancy, and extraction of the fetus from the womb. This can be achieved by either medical (using medications) or surgical (instrumentation) method.

### How often is this procedure done?

In the United States, about 25% of pregnancies are aborted. It has declined since 1979. The figure is the same for Canada, much lower than in the former Soviet Union, which was 60% and Romania (78%), where contraceptives are not readily available. We are unable to obtain local statistics.

### At what stage is this performed?

Legally, in the United States, medically-induced termination, the use of RU-486 pills, manual vacuum extraction or surgical abortion, are done up to 7 weeks of gestation. The law varies in different States in North America.

## **How developed is the embryo at 4 and 8 weeks?**

The length is about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch and weighs about  $\frac{7}{10,000}$  oz. The heart beats and pumps blood. The digestive system, backbone and spinal cord begin to develop. Small buds appear which will eventually be the arms and legs. At the end of 8 weeks, the length is about  $1\frac{1}{8}$  inches and weighs about  $\frac{1}{4}$  oz. The face, eyes, nose, lips, tongue, eyelids (still fused), become evident, and the brain takes shape. Internal organs start developing. Arms, elbows, hands, thighs, knees, lower legs, feet, start to form.

## **What are the possible complications of abortion?**

- Women under age 20 have twice the risk for medical complications
- A little more than 4% of these women have immediate complications like bleeding, perforation of uterus, retained parts of fetus in womb, infection
- Those under 20 also have 150% chance of having injury to their cervix (mouth of womb)
- Women who have had a previous abortion have 200% increased risk of miscarriages after two or more abortions, 160% increased risk of tubal (out of the womb) pregnancy, and increased risk of abnormal positioning of the baby in future pregnancies.

## **What are the most common risks?**

- If pregnancy is terminated for genetic (defect) reasons, 3 in 4 (77%) of the mothers develop Acute Grief Reaction
- In general, the procedure leads to about emotional and psychological disturbance in 1 in 2 (50% of) women, which may last for months, and may include depression, nervousness, insomnia, guilt, regret, loss of self-esteem and anorexia.
- Complications in future pregnancies include bleeding, premature delivery, sterility, and cervical injury in about 1 in 4 (23.3%) of cases
- Miscarriage during subsequent pregnancy is about 1 in 6 (17.5%)

## **What are the additional side-effects?**

- Increased incidence of retention of placenta and severe bleeding
- Increased risk of tubal pregnancy (30% increase after one abortion)

- and 160% higher after two or more abortions)
- Placenta Previa, a condition that produces life-threatening bleeding in subsequent pregnancies is increased by 600% following an abortion
  - Decreased future maternal bonding, because the loss of a baby through  
Abortion may cause the mother to be less affectionate towards future children (Canadian Journal of Psychiatry 1979; 24:610-20).

## **Does abortion increase the risk of breast cancer?**

Yes, according to the British Journal of Cancer (1981;43:72-6) there is 140% greater risk for women who had an abortion to develop cancer of the breast.

## **What is PAS?**

PAS stands for Post-Abortion Syndrome, which is actually an entity under Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This happens to any person who has undergone a traumatic (physical and emotional) experience. In severe case, the symptoms may include anxiety, fear, withdrawal from people, irritability, outburst of anger and rage, difficulty in concentrating, nightmares or sleeping disorders, flashbacks of the abortion, intense grief, guilt, repression or denial, inability to maintain and loving and trusting relationship, sense of helplessness and hopelessness. In these cases, professional help should be sought as early as possible.

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