

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT

# 'repeat abortion'

### How common is abortion?

At least one third of British women will have an abortion before they reach the age of 45.<sup>1</sup>

Just under half of conceptions to under 18 year olds will end in abortion.<sup>2</sup>

### How common is it to have more than one abortion?

Approximately a third of women undergoing abortion in Britain have had one or more previous abortions.<sup>3</sup>

Approximately a quarter of abortions to under 25 year olds are subsequent abortions.<sup>4</sup>

### Why are some people having more than one abortion?

As one might expect, the chance of having more than one unintended pregnancy is something which increases with age. Considering the number of years a woman is fertile, and the imperfect nature of contraception (and human beings!), experiencing more than one unintended pregnancy over a lifetime is not unusual. As the desire/capacity for large families decreases we tend to see an increase in women choosing to end more than one of these unintended pregnancies.

### What about contraception use?

Unintended pregnancy is not always the result of a failure to use contraception. Marie Stopes recently interviewed 430 women who had had more than one abortion and found that 57% were using contraception at the time they got pregnant.<sup>5</sup> However, the majority of these women were using the pill or condoms, which have a typical-use failure rate of 8% and 15% respectively.<sup>6</sup> Just 12% of those interviewed had used emergency hormonal contraception to try to prevent pregnancy.

In their study of repeat abortion in Britain, Stone and Ingham estimate that 35% of women who have abortions would experience at least one more unintended pregnancy within two years if they used a contraceptive method with a failure rate of 10%.<sup>7</sup> This certainly fits with the current statistics for repeat abortion, and shows that even when using contraception, women may experience more than one unintended pregnancy due to intrinsic failure rates, or improper use.

Although LARC (Long Acting Reversible Contraception) methods such as the IUD or implant offer more reliable protection against pregnancy, they may not be suitable for all women. There may be cultural reasons for rejecting certain methods, for example – a lack of menstruation is perceived negatively by some African and Turkish communities.<sup>8</sup> Young women may have misconceptions about LARC methods, or they/their peers may have experienced undesirable side effects.<sup>9</sup>

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Of course, some women are not using contraception at the time of conception, and this could be due to a range of factors. Younger women in particular may have concerns about the confidentiality of sexual health services, or the safety and side-effects of contraceptive methods. The myth propagated by anti-choice groups in the UK, that abortion causes infertility, has been shown to impact young women's motivation to use contraception following a first abortion.<sup>10</sup>



### Are some women likelier to experience more than one abortion?

Stone and Ingham's research suggests that:

*“those who have sought abortion on more than one occasion are more likely (than those who have had one abortion) to be Black, have left school at an earlier age, be living in rented accommodation, report an earlier age at first sexual experience, be less likely to have used a reliable method of contraception at sexual debut and report a greater number of sexual partners.”<sup>11</sup>*

They report that 48% of Black women having an abortion in 2009 were undergoing a subsequent procedure, compared to 32% of White women and 30% of Asian women. There is also significant geographic variation: 13% of abortions in Merthyr Tydfil were repeat procedures, compared with 36% in Croydon.



### Is having more than one abortion safe?

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) advises that:

*“Abortion is a safe procedure for which major complications are uncommon at any stage of pregnancy.”<sup>12</sup>*

Statistically, abortion is safer than carrying to term and giving birth.<sup>13</sup> There are risks, as with any medical procedure, and the chances of a complication occurring increase as gestation increases.

The RCOG states that:

*“There are no proven associations between induced abortion and subsequent ectopic pregnancy, placenta praevia or infertility.”*

The RCOG suggests that the risk of subsequent preterm birth increases with the number of abortions a woman has, but that there is insufficient evidence to imply causality.<sup>14</sup>

Small as the risks are, they are sufficient to support the medical consensus that a reliable contraceptive method used correctly and consistently (backed up by emergency contraception) is preferable to repeated use of abortion, which is more of a physical intervention.



### Does having more than one abortion affect mental health outcomes?

A 2011 systematic review of abortion and mental health by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges found that:

*“The rates of mental health problems for women with an unwanted pregnancy were the same whether they had an abortion or gave birth.”<sup>15</sup>*

The RCOG advises:

*“An abortion will not cause you to suffer emotional or mental health problems in itself, but if you have had mental health problems in the past you may experience further problems after an unplanned pregnancy. These problems are likely to be a continuation of problems experienced before and to happen whether you choose to have an abortion or to continue with the pregnancy”.*



### Is repeat abortion a 'problem'?

Professionals working in sexual health can have mixed views about if and when having more than one abortion is a 'problem' for an individual, or more generally. Some professionals will understandably be concerned if the young women they work with are experiencing repeat unwanted conceptions as a result of struggling to use contraception, a lack of motivation to do so, or are experiencing coercion in their relationship(s) which makes protected intercourse difficult to negotiate.

If someone is experiencing a number of unintended pregnancies in a short space of time, there might be compounding issues affecting their ability to control their fertility as they might wish. It's crucial therefore that sexual health teams work closely with (for example) mental health and domestic violence services to ensure that such issues can be addressed holistically.

Abortion itself is safe, safer than childbirth, so concerns about health should not influence a decision about pregnancy. In Great Britain abortion is legal and free – women should be aware of their rights in accessing it. The myth that free abortion on the NHS is 'limited' should be quashed.



### Why has the rate of repeat abortion increased?

The percentage of repeat abortions in England and Wales has increased slightly from 31% in 2002 to 37% in 2013. We can't know for sure why this is – it might be that women feel more comfortable reporting previous abortions and this is reflected in the figures. More people are having just one or two children, meaning that more unintended pregnancies are likely ending in termination.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to young women, the conception rate for under 18s is actually the lowest it's been since 1969 and the abortion rate for under 18s has dropped from 17.8 per 1000 women in 2002 to 11.7 per 1000 women in 2013.



### What language should we be using to talk about 'repeat abortions'?

Stigma around abortion can be an issue for women of all ages. It may delay access to abortion services, or cause some people to experience emotional difficulties or feelings of isolation. Stigma around so called 'repeat abortion' can be even stronger and it may be harder for women who have experienced more than one abortion to be open with their friends and family, and also with healthcare providers.

It's crucial that professionals working with young people are able to offer factual, non-judgemental information about pregnancy

options to facilitate informed choice. Part of providing impartial support can be thinking carefully about the language we use. One U.S. study argues that the phrase 'repeat abortion' is misleading, as in fact, women who have more than one abortion are likely to experience each procedure differently.<sup>17</sup> Psychologist Dawn Clark argues that 'repeat abortion' echoes the phrase 'repeat offenders' and:

*“presents young women seeking abortion as a deviant group, rather than as individuals for whom an abortion is something that happens in a specific context and for particular reasons.”<sup>18</sup>*



### How can I help the young people I work with to avoid unwanted pregnancy?

- Evidence-based information on contraception, fertility and abortion in educational and non-educational settings will ensure that young people have a better understanding of how pregnancy happens, and how it can be prevented.
- Good information and support will help young people to find a method of contraception which suits them, and to understand effectiveness rates, along with the importance of using condoms to help prevent STIs.
- Information about and easy access to emergency contraception (including the IUD) means that young people are better able to prevent unwanted pregnancies if they haven't used another form of contraception, or if condoms have failed.
- Clearing up myths such as the claim that abortion causes infertility will help young people to better understand conception – anti-abortion groups should not be given a platform to share such misinformation in educational settings.<sup>19</sup>
- Research into repeat abortion in Croydon<sup>20</sup> found that male partners played a significant role in decision-making – it is crucial that we involve young men in our education on this subject.
- Impartial, non-judgemental support ensures that young women are not 'scared off' from services and are able to access the support they need, and know about pre and post abortion counselling should they require it.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (2011) **The Care of Women Requesting Induced Abortion: Evidence Based Clinical Guideline** [www.rcog.org.uk/womens-health/clinical-guidance/care-women-requesting-induced-abortion](http://www.rcog.org.uk/womens-health/clinical-guidance/care-women-requesting-induced-abortion)
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- 3 **(37% in Great Britain in 2013)** Gov.UK (2014) **Report on abortion statistics in England and Wales for 2013** [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/319460/Abortion\\_Statistics\\_\\_England\\_and\\_Wales\\_2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319460/Abortion_Statistics__England_and_Wales_2013.pdf)
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- 8 Education For Choice (2007) **Reducing repeat teenage conceptions: A review of practice** [www.efc.org.uk/PDFs/reducing-repeat-teenage-conceptions-review-of-practice.pdf](http://www.efc.org.uk/PDFs/reducing-repeat-teenage-conceptions-review-of-practice.pdf)
- 9 Applied health and wellbeing partnership (2014) **Long Acting Reversible Contraception, Young Women and Social Norms** [www.cph.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/LARC-Young-Women-and-Social-Norms\\_final-report.pdf](http://www.cph.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/LARC-Young-Women-and-Social-Norms_final-report.pdf) and University of Greenwich (2013) **Understanding Long-Acting Reversible Contraception: An In-Depth Investigation into Sub-Dermal Contraceptive Implant Removal Amongst Young Women in London** [www2.gre.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/793179/D8153-13\\_LARC\\_Full\\_Report\\_WEB.pdf](http://www2.gre.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/793179/D8153-13_LARC_Full_Report_WEB.pdf)
- 10 Hoggart and Phillips (2010) **Young people in London: Abortion and repeat abortion** <https://www.bpas.org/js/filemanager/files/tpyoungpeopleinlondonabortionandrepeatabortion.pdf>
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## Further resources

Education For Choice provides a range of resources for talking to young people about pregnancy and abortion, and delivers the *Abortion: Decisions and Dilemmas* training for professionals: [www.brook.org.uk/efc](http://www.brook.org.uk/efc).

For more information on abortion, contraception and young people, have a look at the studies referred to in this document, listed above.

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