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Family Planning After Miscarriage or Abortion

INTRODUCTION

Unintended pregnancy is one of the main reasons that women seek induced abortions. Many unintended pregnancies occur because women cannot obtain family planning information or services when needed. Making family planning information and services widely available to all women and men is the best way to help reduce the number of abortions.

Abortion is the ending of a pregnancy before childbirth. An induced abortion involves intentional removal of the contents of the uterus before the embryo or fetus is able to survive outside of the womb. An abortion can also happen on its own, which is usually called a miscarriage, or a spontaneous abortion. Most miscarriages occur within the first 3 months of a pregnancy.

Women who have had an induced abortion are frequently at higher risk of another pregnancy, which also may be unintended. To help prevent this pattern, health services need to make

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Approximately 1 in 4 women having an unsafe abortion is likely to face severe complications and will seek hospital care, putting heavy demand on scarce resources. For every identified hospital case, there are many other women who have had an unsafe abortion but who do not seek medical care because they fear abuse, ill-treatment, or legal punishment. The World Health Organization estimates that unsafe abortion accounts for 13% of maternal deaths worldwide.

- 1** If a woman has heavy vaginal bleeding, fever, abdominal pain, or unusual vaginal discharge after an abortion or miscarriage, she must urgently seek medical care. This may save her life.
- 2** After an abortion or miscarriage, fertility returns very quickly. To avoid pregnancy, a woman needs to start a family planning method within one week.
- 3** A woman who wants to become pregnant again after an abortion or miscarriage should wait 6 months so she can regain strength for her next pregnancy.
- 4** To reduce the risk of infection after an abortion or miscarriage, a woman should avoid having sex until all bleeding stops — usually 5 to 7 days. Women who are treated for infection or abortion-related injury need to be sure the vagina or uterus has healed before having sex again.

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CHAPTER 8: FAMILY PLANNING AFTER MISCARRIAGE OR ABORTION

a wide range of contraceptive methods available to women immediately after or when they receive health care for induced abortion or miscarriage.

In some countries women have access to abortion legally, while in other countries abortion is illegal. In both settings, some women obtain abortions from unskilled persons or try to abort themselves. These abortions are unsafe and often dangerous. They may cause infertility and severe and sometimes permanent health problems or even death. Women need to be aware of how dangerous an unsafe abortion can be, and encouraged to use contraception to avoid such a situation. Both women and health care providers need to know the signs of the complications of abortion and miscarriage and the importance of immediate medical care. During post-abortion care, health care providers should offer contraception to women. Family planning should be an essential part of post-abortion care.



SUPPORTING INFORMATION

FACT 1.

If a woman has heavy vaginal bleeding, fever, abdominal pain, or unusual vaginal discharge after an abortion or miscarriage, she must urgently seek medical care. This may save her life.

After an abortion or miscarriage, a woman should seek medical care immediately if she has:

- Vaginal bleeding that is much heavier than the woman's normal monthly bleeding
- Fever or chills
- Dizziness or fainting
- Severe stomach or abdominal pain
- Bad-smelling discharge from the vagina.

If not promptly treated, complications of abortion or miscarriage can cause serious ongoing health problems and leave a woman unable to have children in the future. An abortion or miscarriage can even cause death. Symptoms of these complications include: vaginal bleeding that is much heavier than the woman's normal monthly bleeding, fever or chills, dizziness or fainting, severe stomach or abdominal pains, and bad-smelling discharge from the vagina. A woman who has any of these symptoms after an abortion or miscarriage should seek medical care at once from a trained health care provider.

There are, however, many reasons that women with these complications do not seek immediate medical care, such as the following:

- The woman does not realize that there is a problem. For example, she may think that heavy bleeding is normal after an abortion or miscarriage.
- She does not have the power or ability to seek care, she does not have the money to pay for care, or she has no transportation.
- She hesitates to seek care because she received poor or unfriendly care in the past.
- She does not want anyone to know that she had an abortion or miscarriage.

Thus, educating family members and the community about these signs is important. It may be the woman's mother, sister, husband, or friend who first realizes that the woman needs immediate medical care.

FACT 2.

After an abortion or miscarriage, fertility returns very quickly. To avoid pregnancy, a woman needs to start a family planning method within one week.

A woman's ability to become pregnant returns as early as 2 weeks after an abortion or miscarriage — before her monthly bleeding begins. To prevent another pregnancy, she needs to start a family planning method immediately or at least no later than one week after an abortion. Even if her pregnancy was planned and she wants to get pregnant again, she needs to begin using a contraceptive method to give her body time to regain its strength and prepare for the next pregnancy. Ideally, the woman should receive counseling and a contraceptive method before she leaves the clinic.

Health care providers can help a woman to avoid future abortions by helping her understand why the unintended pregnancy occurred and helping her select a contraceptive method that she can use correctly and consistently.

FACT 3.

A woman who wants to become pregnant again after an abortion or miscarriage should wait 6 months so she can regain strength for her next pregnancy.

Even if her pregnancy was planned and she wants to get pregnant again, after a miscarriage or abortion a woman needs to begin a family planning method

and give her body at least 6 months to regain its strength and prepare for the next pregnancy. Becoming pregnant sooner may lead to health problems for the mother and the baby, such as anemia (low iron level in the blood), another miscarriage, premature birth, or a small or underweight baby.

Starting a contraceptive method immediately after an abortion or miscarriage will help to make sure that the next pregnancy is a healthy one. Couples can choose almost any method. If a woman has an infection, however, IUD insertion or sterilization should be postponed until the infection is cured. She should use another method in the meantime. (For more information on family planning methods, see Chapter 7.)

Health care providers should help women after an abortion or miscarriage to decide on a method that is safe for her. They need to help women avoid a future abortion by helping her understand why the unintended pregnancy occurred, helping her to select a reliable contraceptive method, and encouraging correct and consistent method use.

FACT 4.

To reduce the risk of infection after an abortion or miscarriage, a woman should avoid having sex until all bleeding stops — usually 5 to 7 days. Women who are treated for infection or abortion-related injury need to be sure the vagina or uterus has healed before having sex again.

Light bleeding and spotting is common after an abortion or miscarriage. Couples should wait until this bleeding stops completely and until the woman feels comfortable before having sex again. Typically, the bleeding stops after 5 to 7 days, but it may last up to 2 weeks. If the woman had an injury to her vagina or uterus, or if she is being treated for infection, she should wait until her body is fully healed before having sex.