



Date of issue: September 2017

Adulting

# WHAT REALLY HAPPENS to your body during an ABORTION

An estimated 20 abortions were carried out daily in Singapore last year. Natalie Joy Lee takes a closer look at the physical side of the procedure.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Health recorded 7,217 abortions in 2016. But what that number doesn't tell is what happens to your body – the risks and reactions of what is an intense, physical experience.

**Three options**  
An authorised medical practitioner in Singapore offers three main termination of pregnancy (TOP) methods. As a general rule, women under seven weeks pregnant are advised to opt for medical abortions. This involves taking misoprostol, the so-called "abortion pill". It doesn't carry the risk of cervical tears and uterine perforations since no surgical instruments are used.

The second form is vacuum aspiration, which is administered to women who are up to 14 weeks pregnant. This requires general anaesthesia, which puts you to sleep for about 10 minutes, while a tube is inserted into the womb to remove the fetus.

Lastly, a mid-trimester pregnancy termination can be administered to women who are up to 24 weeks pregnant. This generally requires hospitalisation, and the fetus is physically delivered, followed by the evacuation of the placenta. This is the most complicated procedure of the three, and fasting is necessary before the latter two procedures.

After a TOP, you might still feel the symptoms of early pregnancy such as morning sickness, giddiness and palpitations, but they will gradually disappear over one to two weeks.

**The pain points**

Medical abortions have a 10 to 25 per cent failure rate. On top of this, it may come with complications or some pain. Siti Fatimah, a social worker with Babes, a local organisation that offers support for pregnant women aged 21 and below, remembers counselling Connie\*, whose pain didn't dissipate after she underwent a medical abortion, even with painkillers. She described her vaginal area as feeling "a bit burnt".

Glee actress Naya Rivera described the physical effects of the abortion pill in her memoir *Sorry Not Sorry: Dreams, Mistakes, and Growing Up*. "It was incredibly painful – your body is basically in labour with strong, frequent contractions. I was nauseous and kept going in and out of consciousness because of the pain," says Naya.

Dr Wee Horng Yen, Obstetrician and Gynaecologist at The O&G Care Clinic, says that Naya's experience could be due to the medical abortion being done near the nine-week mark, as most patients under seven weeks pregnant "report being able to cope with simple painkillers such as paracetamol, brufen or tramadol". He adds that while some women may experience "bleeding, strong abdominal cramping, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and headaches" after taking the abortion pill, it isn't common.

If you have the vacuum aspiration procedure, you might feel dizzy while the anaesthesia wears off. In some rare cases, it may cause tissue tears at the top of the cervix or inside the uterus or womb, which may make it more difficult to have a baby in the future. Also, if the contents in the uterus are not properly removed, another operation may be required.

**Road to recovery**

After a TOP, Dr Wee advises to complete your antibiotic course, stay hydrated and get adequate rest, especially during

the first three days. You should also avoid sexual intercourse for the first month. For medical abortions, women can start exercising after the first 24 hours, excluding water sports and prolonged cycling.

Contact your doctor immediately if you encounter signs of post-TOP infection such as pelvic pain, heavy vaginal bleeding, smelly discharge, and fever.

Ultimately, Dr Wee advises responsible use of contraception to avoid having repeated abortions, as this "can scar the womb and cause infertility".

*"It was incredibly painful – your body is basically in labour with strong, frequent contractions. I was nauseous and kept going in and out of consciousness because of the pain."*

Some women may understandably also suffer from emotional trauma after an abortion. Shang\* had to opt for a mid-trimester pregnancy termination due to a medical condition. The 34-year-old was thankful that hospital staff allowed her husband to stay overnight, "otherwise, I'd have been so alone in those 10 hours of labour". While counselling plays an important role in helping women cope with post-abortion trauma, Dr Wee agrees emotional support is equally vital in the healing journey. ☑

**NEED HELP?**

- Family Life Society's Pregnancy Crisis Service: 6339 9770 (24hr)
- Babes Helpline: 1800-TEENMOM (toll-free) / 8111 3535 (24hr)
- Child Bereavement Support Singapore: help@cbss.sg
- Rachel's Vineyard Retreat: info@rachelvineyard.sg