



**Abortion Rights  
Coalition of Canada**

**Coalition pour le droit à  
l'avortement au Canada**

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## ***Position Paper # 18***

### **Abortion Methods: An Overview**

In Canada, two methods of terminating a pregnancy are currently in use: surgical abortions and medication abortions. Both methods are a safe and effective means to end a pregnancy although some women may have a medical condition where their physician would recommend one method over the other. RU-486 (mifepristone), commonly referred to as the abortion pill, is available in the United States but has not yet been approved for use in Canada.

#### **Surgical Abortions**

A surgical abortion is one of the safest medical procedures available to women today, whether performed in a hospital or a clinic setting. The mortality rate is less than one death for every 100,000 abortions. The method most commonly used is vacuum aspiration and is generally done using conscious sedation, which means a woman is awake during the procedure. Some hospitals continue to use a general anesthetic.

During the procedure, which generally takes less than ten minutes, the doctor will gently dilate the cervix (the entrance to the uterus) by inserting and removing a series of narrow, tapered rods. A small hollow tube, which is attached to an aspirator machine, is then inserted into the uterus. The suction is turned on and once the uterus is empty, the suction is stopped. The walls of the uterus are gently scraped with a loop-shaped instrument (called a curette) to ensure that no tissue from the embryo or placenta remains.

Some mild discomfort, such as menstrual-like cramps, may be experienced during the procedure. When conscious sedation is used, patients are usually ready to leave in one half to one hour following the procedure. Most women return to their normal activities the day after their abortion.

#### **Medication Abortions**

A medication abortion (non-surgical) is possible if the gestation period is under seven weeks. A combination of two drugs, methotrexate and misoprostol, is used to cause the abortion.

Methotrexate is usually given by injection, and in five to seven days tablets of misoprostol are placed in the vagina. In most cases the uterus will be emptied within two hours, but in about

35 percent of cases, it can take several days or weeks. Pain medication is given to ease the pain of the cramps that occur when the pregnancy tissue comes out of the uterus. The process is similar to a miscarriage.

Because these drugs can cause birth defects, a woman must be prepared to have a surgical abortion if the medical abortion is unsuccessful. A follow-up exam is required to confirm that the abortion was complete.

For women who must travel long distances to obtain abortion services, surgical abortion will be their only option due to the number of doctor visits required for a medication abortion and the uncertainty of when the abortion will take place.