

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

ABORTION AND MORTALITY



THE **SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF UNBORN CHILDREN** IS THE UK'S LEADING PRO-LIFE CAMPAIGNING ORGANISATION AND THE OLDEST PRO-LIFE GROUP IN THE WORLD

It is crucial to understand whether women die as a direct result of having an abortion. It is also important to know whether women are more likely to die from any cause after having an abortion versus after giving birth. Abortion and its consequences can have a profound impact on women's lives, extending beyond physical health and into their mental health and well-being.

Abortion related death

It is rare for a woman to die directly from abortion complications, but the risk increases with each week of gestation.¹ Abortion related deaths are not well measured, compared with other causes of maternal mortality. There are many barriers to measuring abortion related deaths, which include women's and doctors' unwillingness to participate in research, misclassification of deaths and complications, and underreporting. Abortion related deaths may be misclassified because of similarities to other pregnancy related complications such as miscarriage, haemorrhage or sepsis. **This can lead to abortion appearing safer than it really is.**

Increased risk of death by any cause

It can be difficult to analyse mortality data. Nevertheless, in a recent analysis, researchers found that "women experiencing a pregnancy loss [abortion or miscarriage] are over twice as likely to die compared to women giving birth."²

When deaths from all causes are examined in the first year following an abortion, several large studies have identified an increased risk of death compared either to giving birth or never being pregnant.^{3,4,5} Most deaths are likely related to negative mental health outcomes via increased suicides, accidents and homicide from increased risk-taking behaviours.⁶

A Finnish study found, compared to women who gave birth, women who had an abortion had a 63%

increased risk of death from natural causes, a 324% increased risk of death from accidents, and a 1297% increased risk of death by homicide.⁷

Suicide

Women who have abortions are at greater risk of suicide, compared to women who give birth.⁸

- A 2019 study found that, compared to women who delivered a child, women who had an abortion had a 138% increased risk of suicidal ideation.⁹
- A Finnish study Found that women who had an abortion had a 546% increased risk of death by suicide, compared to women who gave birth.¹⁰

Case Study: Suicide note mentions abortion of twins

When Emma Beck discovered she was pregnant with twins, she was initially pleased. Her partner, however, reacted badly and they separated. So, Emma considered a termination. When she went to a clinic before the termination, the counsellor was on holiday. She was referred to a telephone counselling service.

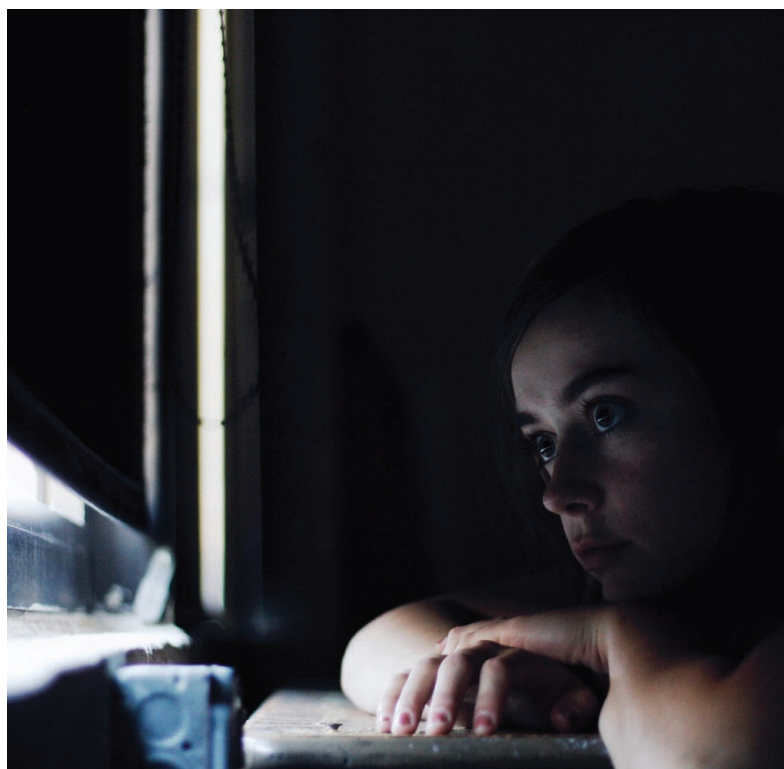
Following her abortion, Emma committed suicide in February 2007. She wrote in a note: "I should never have had an abortion. I see now I would have been a good mum... I told everyone I didn't want to do it, even at the hospital. I was frightened, now it is too late. I died when my babies died. I want to be with my babies: they need me, no-one else does."

Her mother later wrote to the hospital: "I want to know why she was not given the opportunity to see a counsellor. She was only going ahead with the abortion because her boyfriend did not want the twins. I believe this is what led Emma to take her own life – she could not live with what she had done."¹¹

Case Study: Young woman's suicide linked to abortion

In 2016, Jade Rees had an abortion after her 5-month relationship with her unborn baby's father had ended. She had a son from a previous relationship. Jade had a history of mental health conditions.

In the three weeks following her abortion, she overdosed twice within 48 hours and was taken to hospital. Just days after being discharged, she committed suicide while listening to a song called 'Small Bump', which is about an experience of miscarriage. She left notes to her family in which she discussed how the abortion had affected her.¹⁴



Protective effects of giving birth

It is important to also consider that giving birth, compared to having an abortion, may benefit a woman's health. The protective effects of giving birth are well-established, yet not well understood. There are several possible explanations, including:

- Pregnancy may produce direct health benefits. For example, pregnancies carried to term are associated with physiological changes that reduce the risk of reproductive cancers. Additionally, behavioural changes associated with being a parent can improve healthy lifestyle behaviours and reduce risky behaviours.
- Pregnancy loss may contribute to physical and mental effects that are associated with an increased risk of suicide, substance abuse, PTSD, and poorer general health.¹²
- Women who have abortions may already be more likely to take more risks or take less care of her health. Alternatively, they may experience stress after an abortion, or abortion itself may produce psychological stresses that increase the risk of death.¹³



- ¹ Diedrich J & Steinauer J (2009) Complications of surgical abortion. *Clin Obstet & Gynecol* 52(2):205-212.
- ² Reardon DC & Thorp JM (2017) Pregnancy associated death in record linkage studies relative to delivery, termination of pregnancy, and natural losses: A systematic review with a narrative synthesis and meta-analysis. *SAGE Open Medicine* 5:1-17.
- ³ Reardon DC *et al.* (2002) Deaths associated with pregnancy outcome: a record linkage study of low income women. *Southern Medical J* 95(8):834-841.
- ⁴ Gissler M *et al.* (2004) Pregnancy-associated mortality after birth, spontaneous abortion, or induced abortion in Finland, 1987-2000. *Am J Obstet & Gynecol* 190(2):422-7.
- ⁵ Gissler M *et al.* (1996) Suicides after pregnancy in Finland, 1987-94: register linkage study. *Brit Med J* 313:1431-4.
- ⁶ Jalanko E *et al.* (2017) Increased risk of premature death following teenage abortion and childbirth – a longitudinal cohort study. *Eur J Publ Health* 27(5):845–849.
- ⁷ Gissler M *et al.* (1997) Pregnancy-associated Deaths in Finland 1987-1994 – definition Problems and Benefits of Record Linkage. *Acta Obstet Gynecol*
- ⁸ Gissler M *et al.* (2004) *Op. Cit.*
- ⁹ Sullins DP (2019) Affective and Substance Abuse Disorders Following Abortion by Pregnancy Intention in the United States: A Longitudinal Cohort Study. *Medicina* 55:741; doi:10.3390/medicina55110741
- ¹⁰ Gissler M *et al.* (1997) *Op. Cit.*
- ¹¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1579455/Artist-hanged-herself-after-aborting-her-twins.html>
- ¹² Reardon DC & Coleman PK (2012) Short and long term mortality rates associated with first pregnancy outcome: Population register based study for Denmark 1980-2004. *Medical Science Monitor* 18(9):PH71-76.
- ¹³ Reardon DC *et al.* (2002) *Op. Cit.*
- ¹⁴ <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/young-mum-played-ed-sheeran-11137624>
- ¹⁵ Reardon DC & Thorp JM (2017) *Op. Cit.*

Are you struggling after an abortion experience?
Call us today on our Helpline **0345 603 8501**



Society for the Protection of Unborn Children
3 Whitacre Mews, Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB
020 7091 7091 information@spuc.org.uk
www.spuc.org.uk