

Original research article

## Timing of steps and reasons for delays in obtaining abortions in the United States

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### Abstract

**Objective:** We studied the steps in the process of obtaining abortions and women's reported delays in order to help understand difficulties in accessing abortion services.

**Methods:** In 2004, a structured survey was completed by 1209 abortion patients at 11 large providers, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 38 women at four sites.

**Results:** The median time from the last menstrual period to suspecting pregnancy was 33 days; the median time from suspecting pregnancy to confirming the pregnancy was 4 days; the median time from confirming the pregnancy to deciding to have an abortion was 0 day; the median time from deciding to have an abortion to first attempting to obtain abortion services was 2 days; and the median time from first attempting to obtain abortion services to obtaining the abortion was 7 days. Minors took a week longer to suspect pregnancy than adults did. Fifty-eight percent of women reported that they would have liked to have had the abortion earlier. The most common reasons for delay were that it took a long time to make arrangements (59%), to decide (39%) and to find out about the pregnancy (36%). Poor women were about twice as likely to be delayed by difficulties in making arrangements.

**Conclusions:** Financial limitations and lack of knowledge about pregnancy may make it more difficult for some women to obtain early abortion.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the timing of abortion in the United States has been shifting to early in pregnancy. Due, in part, to access to medical abortion, which can be used during the first 9 weeks of pregnancy, and improved techniques for early surgical abortion, the proportion of abortions that were performed in the first 8 weeks' gestation increased from 52% to 59% between 1991 and 2001 [1]. Even so, about 11% of abortions took place at 13 weeks' gestation or later in 2001 [2]. Abortion, while in general a very safe procedure, has a higher medical risk when undergone later in pregnancy; compared to an abortion at 8 weeks' gestation or earlier, the relative risk increases exponentially at higher gestations [3]. In addition, earlier abortions are less of a financial burden for a woman (in

2001, the median charge for an abortion was US\$370 at 10 weeks' gestation, US\$650 at 14 weeks' gestation and US\$1042 at 20 weeks' gestation) [4]. An earlier abortion is also less stigmatized both socially and legally. Public opinion polls indicate a lower level of approval of second-trimester abortions [5], and the Supreme Court declared in 2000 that the legislation intended to prohibit so-called "partial-birth" abortions could be interpreted to cover a range of second-trimester abortion procedures [6]. The impact of such a prohibition contrasts with that of laws that are in place in 23 states requiring women to wait for a specified amount of time between receiving counseling and obtaining an abortion [7]; such laws have been shown to lead to a shift towards the performance of abortions later in pregnancy [8]. In addition, the later is a woman's gestation, the fewer are the providers to perform the procedure [4], which can lead to additional delays.

The gestational age at which women typically have abortions varies by several demographic characteristics, and there is some evidence that these variations are due to

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Table 1

The percentage of women (who would have preferred to have had their abortion earlier) reporting specific reasons for the delay in obtaining an abortion, 2004

Reason	All women	First-trimester patients	Second-trimester patients
It took a long time to make arrangements	59	56	67*
I needed time to raise money to have the abortion	26	23	36*
I couldn't get an earlier appointment	18	19	13
I didn't know where to get an abortion	12	10	16
I couldn't find a place to have an abortion near where I live, so I had to arrange for transportation to get here	7	6	9
I needed time to notify or to get consent from my parents	1	1	1
There is a legally required waiting period where I live	2	2	1
I needed time to go to court to get permission to have an abortion	0	0	0
Some other difficulty in making arrangements delayed me	14	13	18
It took a long time to decide	39	35	50
It was a difficult decision to make	27	25	33
I was worried about the cost	12	10	18*
It took time to talk to my husband/partner	11	10	15
I had religious or moral concerns	10	8	15
It took time to talk to my parents	4	3	7*
Some other difficulty in deciding delayed me	4	2	7
It took some time before I knew I was pregnant or how far along I was	36	36	36
I was waiting for my relationship with my husband/partner to change	7	5	9
I was afraid to tell my husband/partner or my parents that I was pregnant	7	6	9
Someone I am close to put pressure on me not to have an abortion	5	5	5
The clinic/doctor made me wait to have an abortion	5	6	1
Something in my life changed since I became pregnant	4	4	5
I didn't know that I could get an abortion	2	2	3
I didn't think that it was important to have it earlier	2	2	2
I found out late in the pregnancy that the fetus has a defect or is not normal	0.2	0	1
I was delayed for some other reason	6	5	11
<i>n</i>	615	441	145

\* Significant difference compared to first-trimester women ( $p < .05$ ).

differential access to services. Compared to adults, for example, adolescent women are more likely to have later abortions, and black women are slightly more likely than women of other racial and ethnic groups to have later abortions [9]. Lower-income women are also more likely to have later abortions [10]. Documenting inequities in women's ability to obtain an abortion without delay and understanding reasons for delays and which women are more likely to obtain abortions later than they would have liked is a way to assess why these disparities exist and to determine how and for whom improved access to abortion may reduce them.

One way to assess such delays is to examine the length of time taken in each of the stages in the process of obtaining an abortion — from the woman's last menstrual period to the time she suspects she is pregnant, from suspecting pregnancy to confirming her suspicion via a positive pregnancy test, from confirming the pregnancy to deciding to have an abortion, from deciding to have an abortion to beginning to seek abortion services and from beginning to seek abortion services to actually obtaining an abortion. One 1984 study of 197 women examined the various stages in the process of obtaining an abortion and found that, among abortion patients, the mean number of days between a woman's last menstrual period and the

time she suspected pregnancy was 33 days; the mean time from suspecting pregnancy to confirming it via a test was 20–25 days; the mean time from a positive test to deciding to have an abortion was negligible; and the time from the abortion decision to the procedure was 17–21 days. However, this study is 20 years old, and these findings were based on a small sample of women at one clinic [11]. While there is literature on women's decision-making process when faced with an unwanted pregnancy [12–16], there is less information on both women's satisfaction with the timing of their procedures and the reasons some women delay, or are delayed in, obtaining services. A recent study of patients at one abortion clinic in California addressed timing and delays in the context of second-trimester abortion and found that problems in suspecting or confirming pregnancy and difficulty in getting referrals or public insurance were key factors leading to delays in obtaining abortions until the second trimester [17]. Our study complements and expands on this work in several ways: by examining delays experienced by women of all gestational ages, by utilizing a larger and broadly representative sample from multiple sites and by including both quantitative and qualitative components, which together provide a more complete picture of women's experiences.

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