



MEDICAL ABORTION PILLS

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act was passed in India in 1971. This law allows abortion services to be provided legally in government and approved private health facilities. It also specifies the conditions under which women who want to terminate an unwanted pregnancy can be provided abortion services. However, abortion services are currently available in very few facilities concentrated in urban areas, and therefore poor, rural women are unable to access these. Thus, safe and legal abortion is still unavailable to many women.

The introduction of medical abortion pills offers women the possibility of better access to safe abortion services. Medical abortion pills are safer and easier than the prevalent D&C (Dilatation and curettage) method, which involves a minor surgery to open the cervix and scrape out the pregnancy from the uterus.

We will now learn about how the medical abortion pills work, how to take them and what their benefits and adverse effects are.

What is medical abortion?

Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy before the fetus has attained the ability to survive independently outside the uterus. There are several medical technologies through which abortion can be performed.

Mifepristone and Misoprostol are two tablets that are available for having an abortion. Using these tablets to have an abortion is called medical abortion. The dosage of the tablets and the schedule for taking them varies depending on the duration of pregnancy.

How to use the medical abortion pills

In India, medical abortion pills must be used only under the guidance of a registered medical practitioner. The MTP Act allows the use of medical abortion tablets up to 7 weeks of pregnancy. However, the World Health Organization advises medical abortion for up to 9 weeks of pregnancy and recommends the following schedule of tablets.

Mifepristone is available as a 200-milligram tablet and Misoprostol as a 200-microgram tablet. Therefore, in the table below, one mifepristone tablet refers to a 200-milligram tablet and one misoprostol tablet refers to a 200-microgram tablet.

First, a tablet of mifepristone has to be taken orally. Misoprostol has to be used as per the dosage shown in the table 36 to 48 hours later.

Method -1
To terminate a pregnancy between 4 weeks to 7 weeks
Mifepristone and Misoprostol tablets both to be taken orally
First one Mifepristone tablet has to be taken orally
36-48 hours after taking the first tablet, two Misoprostol tablets to be taken together orally

Method -2

To terminate a pregnancy between 4 weeks to 9 weeks

Mifepristone is to be used orally and Misoprostol vaginally

First one Mifepristone tablet has to be taken orally

36-48 hours after taking Mifepristone, four Misoprostol tablets to be inserted inside the vagina together

If abortion has not occurred even 4 hours after insertion of misoprostol, two more tablets of misoprostol to be either inserted in the vagina or taken orally

How do the tablets work?

Mifepristone is a medicine that works against the hormone progesterone. When taken by a pregnant woman, mifepristone blocks the action of progesterone resulting in the following:

- It prevents the growth of the fetus in the uterus.
- It causes the fetus to detach from the uterine lining.
- It softens the cervix.

Misoprostol is a tablet that causes contractions of the uterus. When taken for medical abortion, misoprostol acts in the following ways:

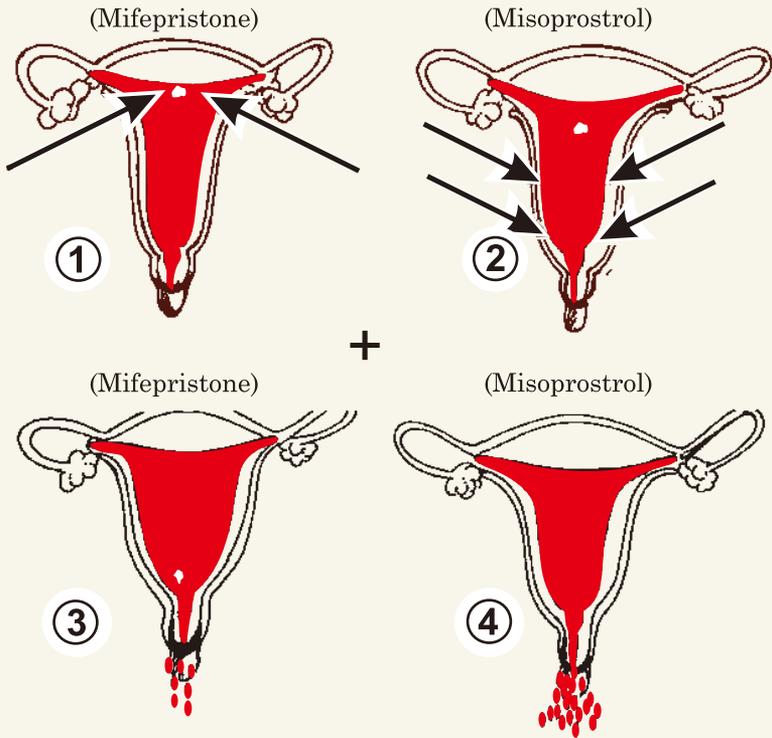
- It softens and widens the mouth of the uterus, the cervix.
- It causes uterine contractions.

The first tablet, mifepristone, causes the fetus to detach from the inner lining of the uterus. The second tablet, misoprostol, then helps to expel the detached fetus out of the uterus. This process is similar to a miscarriage, where bleeding occurs, and the pregnancy is expelled.

What happens after taking the tablets

Bleeding begins within 4-6 hours of taking misoprostol in most women. Occasionally, it may take up to 24 hours for bleeding to begin.

Some women may experience nausea, vomiting, giddiness, diarrhea, fever with rigors and severe abdominal pain. there may be heavy bleeding for 4-5 days, Light bleeding may continue for 8-13 days.



In some countries, women use Misoprostol alone for abortion. In such cases, a higher dosage of misoprostol needs to be used. Also, because misoprostol is used alone, abortion can be delayed and can also be incomplete, leading to complications.

Effectiveness of medical abortion

The likelihood of success with medical abortion varies depending on the number of weeks of pregnancy and the dosage and schedule of tablets.

Weeks of Pregnancy	Dosage and schedule	Likelihood of complete abortion
4-7 weeks	Both the pills by mouth	85-90 %
4-9 weeks	Mifepristone by mouth and Misoprostol vaginally	95-98 %

Danger signs

- Excessive bleeding with a need to change more than two sanitary napkins within an hour's time.
- Continued fever

If bleeding has not started even 24 hours after using misoprostol, or if any of the danger signs are present, immediate medical attention must be sought.

A minimum of three visits to a health care provider are required for a medical abortion.

Rarely, abortion may not occur or may not be complete following the use of medical abortion tablets. In such instances, abortion needs to be completed through a surgical procedure (D&C or MVA) as the medical abortion pills can cause anomalies in the fetus if the pregnancy continues.

Frequently Asked Questions about Medical Abortion

1. Does abortion by the medical abortion method cause more bleeding compared to other methods?

No. When a surgical abortion is performed, the blood is removed from the uterus during the procedure itself. Since the woman is in an unconscious state, she is not able to see the amount of blood lost. On the other hand, when taking medical abortion pills, the pregnancy is expelled over a period of hours to days and therefore the woman is able to see the bleeding occurring.

2. How does the medical abortion method differ from the other methods?

The table below depicts how medical abortion differs from the surgical methods of D&C (opening the cervix and scraping the inner lining of the uterus) or vacuum aspiration (sucking and removing the pregnancy from the uterus).

Medical abortion	Surgical abortion
Can be used to terminate pregnancy of even less than 4 weeks gestation.	Can be used to terminate pregnancy of gestation 7 weeks or above only.
Even if the pills are taken at a health facility, abortion can take place at home.	Needs admission in hospital.
Requires 2-3 visits to the health facility.	Requires 1-2 visits to the health facility.
May experience abdominal pain for 2-3 hours after the use of misoprostol.	May experience pain only during the procedure.
It is safe and has few adverse effects.	It is safe and has few adverse effects.
Bleeding may continue for one or two weeks.	Since most of the blood in the uterus is removed during the surgical procedure, bleeding only lasts for a short duration.
There is no need for anaesthesia. May need tablets for pain relief.	Both pain relief tablets and anaesthesia may be required.
The woman may witness the passage of blood clots and some pregnancy products,	The woman only witnesses bleeding, nothing else.

3. Can emergency contraceptive pills be used as abortion pills?

No, emergency contraceptive pills cannot be used for abortion. Both of them act differently. The emergency contraceptive pills prevent fertilization of the egg released by the ovary by the male sperm. They do not cause abortion. Medical abortion pills cause abortion of an already existing pregnancy.

4. Can medical abortion pills be used while breastfeeding?

Yes, they can be used, while breastfeeding. Some studies suggest that Mifepristone and Misoprostol are secreted in the breastmilk. But there is lack of sufficient evidence on their effects on the baby. If the woman is concerned about the effects of the tablets on her baby, she can avoid breastfeeding for about 24 hours after using the medical abortion pills.

5. Can women with white discharge use abortion pills?

Yes, women with white discharge can use medical abortion pills. In addition, they should seek medical advice and treatment for the white discharge.

6. How soon after a medical abortion can a woman become pregnant again?

It is possible for a woman to get pregnant even immediately following a medical abortion. It is very important to use appropriate contraceptive methods if one does not desire a pregnancy.

7. Can adolescent girls or young women use this method?

Yes, they can. There is no medical evidence against adolescent girls/young women using medical abortion pills. Women who use medical abortion pills in their first pregnancy may experience more severe pain than others and may need tablets for pain relief. Medical abortion is a safe method for women of all ages.

8. Can a woman infected with HIV take medical abortion pills?

Yes, women with HIV can, like all other women, use medical abortion pills. A woman infected with HIV is at higher risk of acquiring a reproductive tract infection when undergoing a surgical abortion. This applies to medical abortion as well.

Who cannot use medical abortion pills

- If there is a suspicion of ectopic pregnancy, that is, that the pregnancy is in the fallopian tubes or outside the uterus, then medical abortion pills should not be used.
- Women who are allergic to mifepristone and misoprostol pills.
- Women with severe anemia and with hemoglobin levels below 8 grams.
- Women with heart disease, high blood pressure, history of chronic liver and kidney diseases.
- Women with a history of any chronic illness should use medical abortion pills only under medical supervision.

Why women prefer medical abortion

Women share the following as the main reasons for preferring medical abortion over other methods.

- It is safe and feels like a miscarriage.
- No need for overnight stay in the hospital.
- No need for anaesthesia, surgery or hospital stay.
- After taking the first pill at the health facility, the subsequent pills can be taken at home as per medical advice.
- It is possible to terminate pregnancy of even less than 7 weeks gestation.
- The abortion remains confidential.
- Simple to use and can be used by the woman herself.
- A suitable method for women who are breastfeeding and women who are single.
- Not very expensive. In India, medical abortion pills cost between 250 to 500 rupees.

According to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act amendments in 2003, only registered medical practitioners approved under the Act can provide medical abortion services.

Medical abortion services can be provided in approved health care facilities by registered medical practitioners with training as prescribed under the MTP Act. These practitioners can also prescribe medical abortion tablets in their clinic. But they can only do so if they have access to a health facility approved under the MTP Act to refer the woman to in case she needs further care. The certificate of approval of this facility should be displayed at the clinic.



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