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Abortion: 95% of Irish women who used pills to end pregnancy 'didn't need surgical intervention'

Study from the British Medical Journal say the pills offer 'an alternative to unsafe methods'

BY GARRETH MACNAMEE | WEDNESDAY 17 MAY 2017, 6:30 AM | [HTTP://JRNL.IE/3392557](http://jrnl.ie/3392557)



Briana O'Doherty at Connolly station, Dublin, after she took a train with other pro-choice campaigners from Dublin to Belfast to bring back abortion pills last year.

Image: PA Archive/PA Images

OVER 90% OF Irish women who used abortion pills to end their pregnancy did not need any surgical intervention or any medical assistance, a new study has found.

The **report from the British Medical Journal (BMJ)** found that taking abortion pills while being supervised online by a doctor in another jurisdiction “can offer an alternative to unsafe methods to end a pregnancy for women in countries where access to safe abortion is restricted”.

Of the 1,000 women studied:

947 were no longer pregnant and no surgical intervention was needed

Of these – 31 women needed either blood transfusions or antibiotics

45 women required some form of surgery to complete the abortion

Eight remained pregnant

There were no deaths

The findings, based on reports from women living in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, show that rates of adverse events are low and that women are able to identify potentially serious complications and seek medical attention when they are told to.

The data was taken from a study conducted by Women on Web (WoW), a non-profit organisation that provides early medical abortion through online telemedicine in countries where access to safe abortion is restricted. The service is currently available for women up to 10 weeks' gestation.

Using that data, it emerged that almost 95% reported successfully ending their pregnancy without surgery. Seven women (0.7%) reported receiving a blood transfusion and 26 (2.6%) reported receiving antibiotics. No deaths resulting from the intervention were reported by family, friends, the authorities, or the media, according to the **study**.

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Table 2 | Outcome of abortion reported by women conducting medical abortion through online telemedicine. Figures are number of women (percentage, 95% confidence interval)

Abortion outcome	All gestations (n=1000)	<7 weeks' gestation (n=781)	7-9 weeks' gestation (n=219)	P value
Pregnancy				
No longer pregnant	992 (99.2, 98.4 to 99.7)	774 (99.1, 98.2 to 99.6)	218 (99.5, 97.5 to 100.0)	1.0
Surgical intervention				
Reported surgical intervention*	45 (4.5, 3.3 to 6.0)	29 (3.7, 2.5 to 5.3)	16 (7.3, 4.2 to 11.6)	0.04
Successful medical abortion				
No longer pregnant and no surgical intervention	947 (94.7, 93.1 to 96.0)	745 (95.4, 93.7 to 96.8)	202 (92.2, 87.9 to 95.4)	0.09

*Dilatation and evacuation; vacuum aspiration.

Table 3 | Treatment for adverse events reported by women conducting medical abortion through online telemedicine. Figures are number of women (percentage, 95% confidence interval)

Treatment	All gestations (n=987)	<7 weeks' gestation (n=768)	7-9 weeks' gestation (n=219)	P value
Antibiotics	26 (2.6, 1.7 to 3.8)	19 (2.5, 1.5 to 3.8)	7 (3.2, 1.3 to 6.5)	0.63
Blood transfusion	7 (0.7, 0.3 to 1.5)	4 (0.5, 0.1 to 1.3)	3 (1.4, 0.3 to 4.0)	0.19
Death	0 (0, 0.0 to 0.4)	0 (0, 0.0 to 0.5)	0 (0, 0.0 to 1.7)	1.0
Any adverse event	31 (3.1, 2.1 to 4.4)	21 (2.7, 1.7 to 4.1)	10 (4.6, 2.2 to 8.2)	0.19

Source: BMJ

Ninety three women, which is nearly 10%, reported experiencing symptom for which they were told to seek medical attention. Most women took the advice of their doctor. The five which did not take their doctor's advice did not report experiencing an adverse outcome.

The authors of the study did not establish how many of the women were in Northern Ireland and how many were in the Republic.

The study has been welcomed by the Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) which says the study proves that abortion drugs like mifepristone and misoprostol are safe.

ARC spokesperson Linda Kavanagh said: "Often media reports in Ireland imply early medical abortion with pills is unsafe – this study shows that simply isn't the case. In countries where medical abortion is legal, women are largely unsupervised while taking the pill. In the UK for example women ingest the first pill at an abortion clinic, but then go home to have their abortion."

Kavanagh also said that despite the safety of the pills, abortion seekers still need access to professional health care and advice when taking abortion pills.

She added that the criminalisation of abortion puts women and pregnant people at risk. Kavanagh added: "Women are afraid to access post abortion care, or to seek assistance during their abortions because of the very real threat of a 14 year prison sentence imposed."

In April last year, a **21-year-old woman was handed a suspended sentence** in Northern Ireland after her housemates reported her to authorities for taking the two pills.

Cora Sherlock of the Pro Life Campaign said that taking the tablets “is never a trivial matter”. She also claimed that the study could be construed as biased.

“Nonetheless, when this issue is discussed it is normally used as a platform for pushing for wider access to abortion and in the Irish context this means repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

“You could write the script in advance for how the discussion on this survey will develop. There will be lots of references to getting rid of the Eighth Amendment and very little discussion if any on the devastating consequences of the abortion pill for the unborn child and the potential serious mental health effects it can have on many women. The main author of the survey is a well-known campaigner for wide-ranging abortion. That should be noted in any discussion of the survey.”

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