

Who Not When

The Facts: Later Discovery of Pregnancy

Once someone has decided to end their pregnancy, they deserve safe, and affordable abortion care—as early as possible and as late as necessary. But someone can't decide to end their pregnancy until they know they are pregnant.

On average, most people discover they are pregnant around 5 1/2 weeks after their last menstrual period. But many people discover their pregnancies later: at 8 weeks, 12 weeks, or even 20 weeks and beyond.

For abortion seekers, recognizing a pregnancy later is an initial delay. It leads to greater burdens of travel, cost, and logistics.



How common is later discovery of pregnancy?

People assume almost all pregnancies are discovered early. But in fact, later discovery of pregnancy is fairly common:

When are pregnancies discovered?

1 in 4 pregnancies discovered after 7 weeks	1 in 13.5 pregnancies discovered after 12 weeks	1 in 475 pregnancies discovered after 20 weeks
---	---	--

(And these do not even include pregnancies that end in miscarriage or abortion)

How later discovery of pregnancy affects abortion access

Someone cannot try to get an abortion until they know they are pregnant. **Most people who seek abortion care later in pregnancy, particularly after 20 weeks, did not know they were pregnant until later.**

Once a pregnancy is discovered, abortion seekers try to access care as soon as they can. However, as a pregnancy progresses, the cost of abortion care goes up and the number of providers goes down. And more and more restrictions go into effect.

People do not wait. They are delayed.

“

As COVID began affecting my community, I somehow contracted Hepatitis A. Symptoms include extreme bloating, nausea, fatigue, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, and missed periods. At the same time, my doctor's office had shut down, and it was complete chaos trying to get blood tests and exams to get a diagnosis and treatment. I waited a long time for critical appointments and testing results, and over months of tracking my progress, somehow none of my healthcare providers caught that I was pregnant.

I think we all, myself included, should be aware that this does not happen to a certain kind of person under certain circumstances. It can happen to all kinds of people under all kinds of circumstances. And it's not our fault. Fault implies that someone has made a mistake or needs to take responsibility for an accident or misfortune. **Needing an abortion should not be considered someone's fault. Withholding an abortion should not be used as a punishment.** Situations vary and this care should be available to all of us.

“Claire,” Abortion Seeker
who Traveled to Colorado

”

Understanding Later Discovery of Pregnancy

Common reasons for not recognizing pregnancy include:

No symptoms or symptoms not attributed to pregnancy

- Close to half of pregnancies in the US are unintended. Unplanned pregnancies are discovered later than intended ones. People who didn't intend to be pregnant may not look for symptoms or connect them to a pregnancy.
- People's bodies have different responses to pregnancy. They may lack common symptoms like nausea, tiredness, and sore breasts.
- Other health conditions, treatments, and lifestyles may affect pregnancy symptoms. They may mask or mimic symptoms that would suggest a pregnancy.

Contraceptive use

- More than half of abortion seekers used contraception in the month they became pregnant. Birth control methods are generally very effective, but no method—and no user—is perfect all of the time.
- 18 in every 100 who use male condoms become pregnant each year
- 9 in every 100 who take birth control pills become pregnant each year
- 9 in every 100 who use the vaginal ring become pregnant each year
- 1 in every 100 who have an IUD becomes pregnant each year

Absent or Irregular periods

- Irregular periods are normal, particularly for teenage girls and perimenopausal women.
- Many factors can affect menstrual cycles including:
 - certain medications
 - stress
 - weight changes
 - obesity
 - exercise
 - use of birth control
 - medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, hyperthyroidism, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and eating disorders

Being Very Young

- Young people and children do not have regular periods
- Children and teenagers may experience sexual abuse or they may become sexually active. They may not understand or recognize a pregnancy
- Teens in low income families and teens in “child welfare systems” are at higher risk of teen pregnancy

Previous births

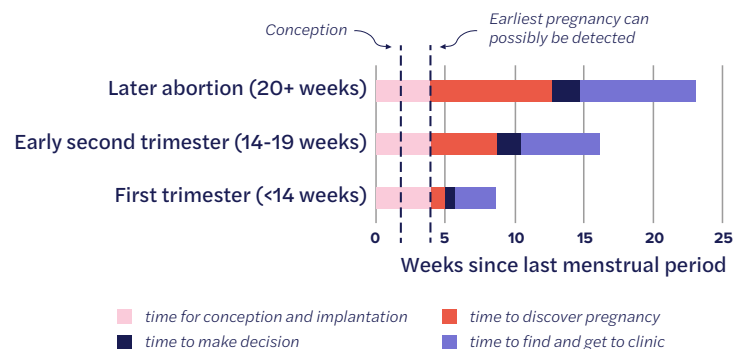
- Spotting after pregnancy is common, and can be mistaken for menstruation
- No two bodies are the same and no two pregnancies in the same body are the same. When a pregnancy looks or feels different than a previous one, it can be easy to miss or misinterpret the signs

Outside Stressors

- Factors like an abusive relationship, economic hardship, housing instability, illness, and other disruptive events can make it harder for someone to recognize a pregnancy
- Groups affected by systemic inequality and racism have a higher likelihood of later pregnancy recognition. This includes young people, Black and Hispanic people, and people with low incomes.



Time to an abortion from the Turnaway Study



Source: Foster, D.G. *The Turnaway Study. Ten Years, a Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having—or Being Denied—an Abortion*. Scribner: 2020.

People who don't know they are pregnant are not denying their pregnancies; they're just not aware of them.

This can happen to anyone, and for many reasons. And sometimes these factors compound each other.

Scan to find this fact sheet online

