

Fact Sheet

Q&A: ABORTION TO SAVE LIVES

ABORTION
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Question

Is abortion ever necessary to save the life of a pregnant woman or girl?

Answer

Yes, sometimes it is.

Facts

Abortion to save the life of a woman or girl is medically necessary under certain circumstances and is widely accepted by professionals and institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO). A medically necessary abortion is performed to decrease the physical or mental health risk to a woman or girl or in order to save her life.

Defining what constitutes a medically necessary abortion poses a challenge because medical decisions regarding potential morbidity and mortality are highly subjective. A variety of medical conditions in pregnant women have the potential to negatively affect women's health and cause complications that may be life-threatening.

Approximately 94 percent of countries in the world permit abortion to save a woman's life (Singh et al. 2009). Some countries provide detailed lists of conditions considered life threatening. According to WHO, "These lists are generally meant to provide illustrative examples of situations that are considered life-threatening, but they are not meant to preclude the doctor's clinical judgment of what is life-threatening for a particular woman. Such lists, however, may be interpreted restrictively, or be considered exhaustive, when in fact they are not. For example, if a list of physical dangers to life is considered exhaustive, that would exclude mental health conditions that are life-threatening." (WHO 2003)

Anti-abortion activists argue that abortion is never medically necessary because of technological advances in medical care (American Life League 2002). However, even in countries with highly advanced medical technology, women facing life-threatening conditions during pregnancy, such as previously undiagnosed cancer or life-threatening conditions that develop during pregnancy like preeclampsia (an advanced form of hypertension) may still need an abortion (Cook et al. 2003).