

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a sleeveless, knee-length dress with horizontal black and white stripes and a matching fabric belt tied at the waist. She is also wearing a black watch on her left wrist and tan high-heeled shoes. She stands in a bright, modern interior with a wooden floor and a large window in the background. A large teal circle on the right side of the page contains the main title.

# The Serious Health Decision Women Aren't Talking About

Until Now

*What do these women have in common? They've all had an abortion—and so, say the statistics, have many women you know. Odds are they never said a word about it to you: Abortion is, in 2009, a topic relegated to political debates and picket lines. Whether you're pro-life or pro-choice, now is the time for more openness and understanding.*

**TOVA**

"My husband and I want to have a baby one day—but it will be planned."

**by Liz Welch**

*photographs by Nathaniel Welch*

# It's

10 A.M. on a sunny day in Seattle and 25-year-old Anna\* is sitting on the end of a gynecological exam table, naked except for her baggy gray T-shirt and the blue paper blanket draped over her lap. Her body is trembling but not from cold—she's pregnant and she's scared. Deborah Oyer, M.D., the owner and medical director of Aurora Medical Services, where Anna is about to have an abortion, asks Anna to put her feet in stirrups. "The more you relax, the less pressure and pain you will feel," she says. Dr. Oyer dilates Anna's cervix and turns on the vacuum aspiration machine. She inserts a tube through Anna's cervix, and a gentle whirring sound fills the room. She barely has to raise her voice to explain, "The cramping you feel is totally normal." Anna lets out a few gasps before Dr. Oyer clicks off the machine, signaling the end of the five-minute procedure.

"We're all done," Dr. Oyer says. The young woman groans and holds her stomach, but still smiles a bit. "Really?" she says. "That was not nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be." Dr. Oyer isn't surprised by Anna's reaction. "I hear that refrain almost daily when I perform abortions," she says later. "It's as if women expect me to come at them with whirling knives."

In the end there's little drama to the procedure, but that doesn't make it a simple experience. How could it be, when abortion inspires culture-quaking political and religious debates and feels too charged to discuss, even woman to woman? "No one talks about abortion on a personal level—there's too much stigma attached," says Aspen Baker, the cofounder of Exhale, an after-abortion counseling help line.

In a perfect world, no woman would ever need to end a pregnancy. But in reality, one in three women will have at least one abortion by the time she is 45, and these women run the gamut of ages, races, backgrounds and beliefs. "I've seen every type of woman in my office, from Catholics to Muslims to mothers with three kids," says Dr. Oyer. "I've even treated someone I recognized—because I'd seen her before, protesting right outside my clinic."

Yet in *Glamour* interviews, counselors, medical experts and more than two dozen women who have had the procedure agreed that women don't discuss how they decided whether or not to end a pregnancy—how it felt and how they recovered, physically and emotionally; how they look back on their choice as time passes. The result is that millions of women grapple alone with the decision and the emotions that come afterward. Adamantly pro-choice women may be shocked by their own sadness about having an abortion whereas extremely religious women may be stunned by their sense of relief; both reactions, experts say, are normal. "We've gone

from doctors advertising abortion services in the 1900s and women openly demanding the right to abortion in the 1970s, to a time now when some women can't even admit to themselves that they're having an abortion, much less tell their loved ones," says Katharine O'Connell, M.D., an ob-gyn at Columbia University. Nearly all the women *Glamour* spoke to said they kept their abortion a secret. "I had an abortion last May and, aside from my boyfriend, went through the entire experience alone," says 22-year-old Lindsay. "My roommate found me bawling at home one day and asked, 'What's wrong?' I told her and she threw her arms around me and said,



Mestraud and her daughter, Vivienne

**“I am still filled with regret—**  
*not that I had an abortion,*  
*but that I will never meet that child”*

I had an abortion on April 17, 2008. I feel like a murderer, but medically I know that I made the right decision. I'm blessed that I already have two children: After seven years of trying to have a baby, we adopted our son. Two weeks after his adoption was finalized, I got pregnant. The pregnancy was awful; because of complications with my type 1 diabetes, I was on bed rest and in and out of the hospital. My daughter was born healthy, but I lost my eyesight because of the strain. I'm legally blind now, though my attitude is, who needs vision when you have two healthy kids? My husband was scheduled for a vasectomy and I was still breast-feeding when I discovered I was pregnant again. My doctors told me carrying the pregnancy full-term would be incredibly dangerous—my high-risk ob-gyn said my baby might survive, but I might not. Still, it was not an easy decision. Physically, the abortion wasn't painful, but emotionally, it was hell. I didn't talk to anyone but my husband and doctor about it for a long time. When I finally told my brother, he said, "I'm so sorry I wasn't there to hug you when you came home." —Margaret K. Mestraud, 34, Clifton, Va.

MESTRAUD: STYLIST: PASCALE LEMAIRE FOR THE ARTIST AGENCY; HAIR AND MAKEUP: KATHY ARAGON FOR THE ARTIST AGENCY; GAP JACKET AND JEANS: PREVIOUS SPREAD: STYLIST: FELICIA JOCUS; HAIR: ALEJANDRA AT ARTISTS BY TIMOTHY PRINNO.COM; MAKEUP: BRENNA SCARROTT FOR DE FACTO

'I had one too.'" Every woman who faces the abortion decision deserves a friend's arms around her—as well as factual, unbiased information about what lies ahead. Let the plainspoken stories and advice on these pages open the dialogue.

## How to Make the Best Decision for You

Tiana, 33, knew the moment she saw the cross on her pregnancy test that she'd have an abortion. "I was 19 and studying dance," she says. "My boyfriend and I had been together for only one month and I got pregnant the first time we had unprotected sex. I didn't even consider the possibility of keeping the child." Tiana says her surgical abortion was exactly what she expected: "The procedure is unsettling, because they basically vacuum out your uterus. It was painful, but I knew it was the right choice and I had no guilt afterward." This is not unusual, says Baker: "I cannot tell you how many women call us wondering if they are somehow bad people for feeling relieved, or happy, or proud for having made it through a difficult decision."

Women who are less sure about their decision may not rebound so quickly. Monique, a 35-year-old mother of two, ages 9 and 11, found out she was pregnant last June. "I was recently divorced and had just started dating my boyfriend," she says. "I didn't feel ready for another child." Still, the decision to have an abortion was difficult. "I felt so ashamed," she says. "Physically I was fine, but I was sick emotionally for weeks." The experience traumatized Lisa, 36, even more. She had her first abortion at the urging of her boyfriend when she was 19 and says it triggered depression that ultimately led to drug abuse. While addicted, she got pregnant again and had a second abortion. Years later, after Lisa joined Narcotics Anonymous, married her current husband and had two children, her regrets surfaced fully. "I was raised Christian, and had already asked God to forgive me, but I couldn't forgive myself," she says. Distraught, Lisa wrestled with her emotions and more depression until she found an abortion recovery bible study group. "I came to a place of acceptance," she says. "I would give anything *Continued on next page* ◆◆

**Liz Kupcha,**

37,  
Amity Harbor, N.Y.

*"I wasn't scared at all—I already knew it was a safe procedure"*



I've had two abortions. The first one was when I was 18. (We'd used a condom, but it must not have been on right.) It wasn't a hard decision—I did not want to leave college to raise a kid—and I wasn't scared at all; I knew it was a safe procedure. When I got pregnant again, I knew exactly what to do. I was 23 and studying for the LSATs. The condom broke, so the day my period was late, I was sure I was pregnant. I went to a different clinic, and there were protesters yelling, but they didn't bother me. I really believed that having a child would derail my plans. I was perfectly fine with my decision then and don't have any regrets, especially now. At 37, I'm married to a man I've been with for nine years, am running my own department at work, and am finally ready to be a mom: I'm pregnant and due May 6.

**Sarah Hanley,**

30,  
South Royalton, Vt.

*"The clinic sent me home to really think about my options"*



When I was 22, I was on the Pill, so I was shocked when I missed my period. I thought the clinic would force me to have an abortion as soon as I walked in; instead, they explained the procedure and tried to assess if I was ready. They did an ultrasound—the nurse was eight months pregnant, and that made me realize the clinic was not pro-abortion, but pro-choice—and told me I was eight weeks along. I was surprised when the clinic sent me home to really think about my options; they wanted me to be 100 percent sure this was the right choice for me. I went back that afternoon and had the procedure. Afterward I kept waiting to have a nervous breakdown; I worried the sight of a newborn would send me into hysterics. That never happened. If anything, the experience forced me to take control of my life.

**Tova Ramos,**

26,  
Reno, Nev.

*"I felt irresponsible for getting myself into that situation"*



My pregnancy was a total surprise: My husband survived Hodgkins Lymphoma but was told the chemo had made him sterile. When I conceived, he was elated, but I was floored. I was 22 and didn't feel ready to be a mother. I was also taking Accutane for acne, which can cause horrible birth defects. That made our decision easier. It's crazy, but I still felt irresponsible for getting myself into that situation. I told my mother, who was very reassuring. She knew my experience would be nothing like the potentially life-threatening abortion she had in the 1960s, when it was illegal. My abortion was not painful, but I am wistful about losing the physical sensation of being pregnant. I never realized how a baby could get into a woman's blood—I still feel a connection to that little lima bean. My husband and I want to have a baby one day—but it will be planned.



“I often wonder *if I will get the chance to be pregnant again*”

I had an abortion when I was 26—the same age my mother was when she had me. I thought the father was The One, but he was not ready to have a family. We were doing the rhythm method (I'm allergic to latex condoms and had a terrible reaction to an IUD). I considered raising the baby on my own—my mom did it, so could I—but I decided against it in the end. I wanted my partner to be on the same page. So I flew to California, where my mom lives, and she took me to a clinic. My boyfriend had offered to pay for the whole thing, but then I decided to get general anesthesia, which is much more expensive, so we agreed to split it. I did not want to be awake for it, and my mother said, 'Being asleep is the kindest thing you could do to yourself.' Before the procedure, they took an ultrasound photo of the eight-week-old baby. I still have that picture. Now 33 and single, I often wonder if I will get the chance to be pregnant again. That may have been my one shot, but I am still OK with it. —Natalie Ferraro, 33, Brooklyn

Go to [glamour.com](http://glamour.com) to read more women's stories or share your own.

to go back, but I can't. Instead, I choose to forgive myself and to move forward.”

Anne Baker, who has counseled more than 25,000 women and is director of counseling at Hope Clinic in Granite City, Illinois, says many women spend so much time beating themselves up for getting pregnant that they don't consider the full array of feelings they might have *after* the procedure. “Feeling rushed, or wanting to ‘get it over with,’ can be a cause for guilt or regret later,” she says. “It's crucial to really think the issue through.” Some clinics offer in-depth counseling to explore these issues up front, but many don't; if you or someone you love is feeling at all uncertain, Baker recommends seeking out counseling via a therapist or Backline, an organization dedicated to helping women with parenting, adoption and abortion issues ([yourbackline.org](http://yourbackline.org)); you can also find more information at [hopeclinic.com](http://hopeclinic.com) or [faithaloud.org](http://faithaloud.org), which offers a faith-based perspective on parenting choices). At the very least, Baker suggests that you ask yourself these questions.

**Are you doing this because you feel it's best for you?** According to a recent report by the American Psychological Association, the perception of being forced to have an abortion—whether by a partner or because of financial hardship or other issues—can trigger negative feelings afterward. It's so critical that this is your decision first and foremost that many clinics won't allow a boyfriend or partner who might influence you into the exam room.

**Do you believe that an abortion is equivalent to killing a child that is already born?** “If a woman truly thinks having an abortion is the same as murdering a child you might see on the playground, she should *strongly* reconsider and seek counseling and other alternatives, such as adoption,” Baker says.

**How do you think you'll cope?** This is the most important question: If you feel like you can deal with any emotion you might have—guilt, anger, sadness or relief—then you will probably handle things well. If you are certain you'll wish you never went through with it, heed those instincts.

**Do you suffer from a mood disorder, such as depression or anxiety, or are you bipolar?** If you have been diagnosed with a mood disorder or think you might have one, make sure you are being treated and discuss your decision with a therapist. “There's no causal effect between abortion and long-term psychological distress,” says Robert Blum, M.D., a professor at Johns Hopkins University who led a review of 20 studies on the subject. “But women who have a history of mental health problems are more likely to have issues after an abortion.”

**Do you have a support system?** A friend, partner, parent, sibling or counselor—having someone nonjudgmental to lean on is one of the best ways to safeguard your emotional well-being, studies show. “If you talk about your thoughts and feelings beforehand with a trusted confidant who supports you, you're more likely to cope well afterward,” Baker says. Since 78 percent of women who've had an abortion say they are religious, she often recommends they use their spiritual beliefs as a source of strength and comfort rather than punishment. “Women are often amazed to hear that there are religious organizations that offer nonjudgmental spiritual counseling on the issue,” Baker says. (One is the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; [rerc.org](http://rerc.org).) And since women tend to be harder on themselves than others, she also suggests this exercise: “Try being as compassionate with yourself as you would be with a good friend going through the same thing.”

## WHY IS THE ABORTION RATE SO HIGH?

While 54 percent of women who have an abortion say they were using contraception, 46 percent admit they weren't. The simple truth is that we can do better—and that we owe it to ourselves to use

protection consistently. “You've got to talk to your doctor about all your birth control options—discussing what you like and don't like about any method—so you can have a plan that works for you in the

long term,” says Dr. O'Connell. And every woman should have emergency contraception on hand as backup. It can prevent pregnancy if taken within 72 hours of a birth control slipup.

# WHAT WOMEN ASK MOST ABOUT ABORTION

Ob-gyns and counselors answer private questions about everything from the medical risks to adoption options.



## Does it hurt?

If the cervix is well numbed, women shouldn't feel pain during a vacuum aspiration, the most common procedure. But "virtually every woman feels cramping, as the uterus contracts to stop bleeding," says Miriam McCreary, M.D., a Minnesota-based ob-gyn who has performed abortions for more than two decades.

## Will an abortion affect my fertility?

No. In fact, if you don't start taking birth control immediately, you could get pregnant again right away (which is why most doctors insist that you leave with a birth control plan in hand). "Studies also show no negative impact on future fertility," says Cassing Hammond, M.D., an ob-gyn and associate professor at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago.

## Is the procedure dangerous?

"An abortion is a very safe procedure for women. Whether it's in terms of a woman's mortality or her chance of infection,

hemorrhage or hysterectomy, an abortion is safer than childbirth," says Dr. O'Connell. But every surgical procedure has risks. The most common complications, which happen in fewer than 2 percent of all cases, include infection (which is treated with antibiotics) and retained tissue, which often requires a second procedure.

## Can I take the abortion pill?

Yes, but only if you are fewer than nine weeks pregnant (counting from the first day of your last period). It's a two-drug combo; the first pill is taken at a clinic or doctor's office and stops the pregnancy. You are sent home with a second pill that will induce miscarriage. Taking a pill doesn't necessarily make the process easier; some women report severe cramping and are alarmed by the heavy bleeding.

## What should I do if there are protesters?

"Ignore them and keep walking," says Bill Falls, a Washington, D.C.-area clinic escort since 1995.

If you're nervous, Falls suggests asking the clinic when you make an appointment if they provide escorts. "It's important to remember that it's against the law for protesters to touch you, or impede your access to the clinic."

## How long will I have to wait to get an abortion?

"In many states, you can schedule an abortion for the following day," says Donna Crane, policy director for NARAL Pro-Choice America. "But 22 states have waiting periods and require you to listen to a state-mandated script, usually 24 hours before you can legally have the procedure." Doctor availability is another, sometimes critical, issue. In South Dakota, for example, there is only one clinic that provides abortions, and no local providers. Planned Parenthood imports ob-gyns from neighboring states two days a week, but you may not be able to get an appointment with one of them for up to 14 days. Similarly, some clinics have limits on

how late in the pregnancy they will perform an abortion, which means you may have to travel to another state to have the procedure.

## Will it increase my risk of breast cancer?

No, according to both the National Cancer Institute and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

## How do I find a safe doctor?

While the vast majority of providers offer quality care, there have been reports of clinics that skimp on protocol, and some "crisis pregnancy centers" may even use propaganda to try to prevent women from getting an abortion. To make sure you are in the best hands, call a trusted ob-gyn to see if she performs the procedure or can provide a good referral. Or call your local Planned Parenthood or the National Abortion Federation's hotline (800-772-9100) for a clinic near you.

## What if I decide against abortion, but I'm still not sure I'm ready to be a mom?

"There is support available if you want to continue the pregnancy," says Grayson Dempsey, founder of Backline. First, see an ob-gyn to address any prenatal issues. Then seek out resources such as [pregnancyoptions.info](http://pregnancyoptions.info), which offers information about pregnancy, abortion, adoption and programs like Medicaid (which may help cover delivery costs).

## What about adoption? I don't know where to start.

Few women do, and "that's one reason that only one percent of pregnant women choose adoption," Dempsey says. "Unfortunately, there is as much stigma around adoption as abortion!" Backline's talk line (888-493-0092) can refer you to agencies that will guide you through adoption laws in your state—and offer one-on-one support. ■