

# Terminating pregnancy for medical reasons

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nose



**Learning about a serious abnormality with an unborn baby almost always comes as a shock to parents. Most are unprepared for the emotional and ethical conflicts that will follow. Most will struggle with the decision of what comes next.**

**“I was healthy and not expecting any abnormal results. It was such a shock to be told my baby had no chance of survival.”**

- Betty

Red Nose can provide you with non-judgemental support and put you in touch with other parents who have gone through a similar experience, but no one can make this choice for you. You must be guided by your own values but remember that all options and decisions are valid.

Your obstetrician and genetic counsellor can offer you information and support. Remember that you have a right to up-to-date, unbiased information that is delivered clearly, compassionately and comprehensively. It is also okay to seek a second opinion if it will help.

In this time of stress and uncertainty it is common to experience: shock, disbelief, confusion, distress, guilt or self-blame and feelings of powerlessness. You may be wondering how you will cope, how your decision will impact your family, and what you will tell others.

It's important to give yourself time to absorb the news and fully comprehend the range of possible outcomes for your baby and how these may affect you and your family in the short and long term. Keep in mind that you may find it hard to take in information. Having a close friend or family member attend appointments with you or writing your questions down can help.

If your baby has a condition that means they will die before or soon after birth, your doctor can provide information and options on continuing or ending your pregnancy.

## Continuing your pregnancy

You may choose to continue your pregnancy and allow your baby to live his or her life, however long that may be. In this instance early preparations can be made for the palliative care of your baby. Palliative care plans are designed to ensure that your baby is comfortable and that their short life is as good as possible. This means providing special care for the baby while avoiding medical treatments that would not be helpful or might hurt the baby and separate them from you.

## Deciding to end your pregnancy

Other parents make the decision to end or terminate the pregnancy. Your doctor will be able to give you more information on the available options in your circumstances and explain the timeframe in which you need to make a decision. Your doctor will also advise you on the medical procedures they propose to undertake. These will vary depending on how far along your pregnancy is.

Don't be afraid to ask as many questions as you need to, so you feel as comfortable as possible.

### You could ask:

- Where will the procedure take place?
- Can my partner, family member or friend stay with me?
- Who will be looking after me?
- What will my baby feel?
- When will I be able to go home? Or will I be able to stay in the hospital if I want to?
- Is the procedure painful? If so, what pain relief can I have?
- Will I be able to see my baby afterwards?

## After your baby has died

If your medical termination was after 20 weeks you will find the information in the Stillbirth and Newborn Death factsheet of help. If your medical termination was before 20 weeks the information in our Early Pregnancy Loss factsheet may be useful.

## What to tell children

If you have children who knew about the pregnancy, they may be aware of your sadness or distress. Try to provide a simple and honest explanation of what is happening. Some people may say “the baby is not growing properly”.

They may need comfort, reassurance and time to deal with their emotions too. The death of a baby is a tragic experience that is unique for every bereaved parent. For parents who decide to end their pregnancy, their feelings can be complex. Some may initially feel a sense of relief that the experience is over. Some parents feel selfish for this decision; their love and concern for the baby conflicting with the needs of the rest of the family. Sometimes one parent carries more guilt; sometimes others feel blamed for the decision. Support from family and friends at this time can make a big difference.

## Memory making

Most bereaved parents are fearful that their baby will not be remembered following death. It is therefore especially important that time is taken to create keepsakes and memories at the time the baby is born. Memory making can be undertaken whether you are able to see and hold your baby or not. Sands has a factsheet *Creating Memories* to help consider the many and varied options to remember your child.

## Your grief

People who are grieving find their feelings of loss and sadness come and go. Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and the baby’s due date are commonly more difficult days, as parents remember their baby and think of the ‘what if’s’. Other stressful life events, such as the death of a loved one, work or financial pressure can also bring up grief emotions.



It’s important to remember that grief is a normal healing process for which there is no set timeline. As a society we expect grief to be finished at some stage - but grief never ends, it just becomes easier to manage with time. Don’t expect too much of yourself. You have a right to recover in your own way. For some parents this will happen quickly, while others may take a long time. People should be aware that men and women often grieve differently. It’s important for partners to show understanding, patience and to communicate openly to prevent potential relationship problems and conflicts.

## Other people’s reactions

Many parents who choose to end a pregnancy due to a diagnosis of abnormality are unsure of what and how much to tell people.

If you do decide to tell people, how much you tell them is entirely up to you. You may want to talk about everything that happened or only that you lost your baby. You are the best judge of what you are comfortable with sharing with others, so take the time you need to think about it and tell people when you feel ready.

Telling trusted family and friends about this experience can be helpful, as they will form vital support networks.

You may encounter people who cannot understand or accept your decision. Even those who are close to you may not be able to support you in the way you had hoped, and this should be considered in deciding what you would like to share.

## The future

Ending a pregnancy due to an abnormality can have a devastating impact on families. Parents often say it is the most significant and difficult decision they’ve ever had to face. Sadness and grief are normal reactions, but with good support parents do get through this experience.

Parents often fear the problem will recur in a subsequent pregnancy. Your doctor can discuss the possibility of future pregnancies being affected. Our Red Nose factsheet on *Pregnancy after Loss* may also be helpful.

## Where to go for more help

Remember that you are not alone in this experience. Many parents find talking with other parents who have had a baby die, like a Red Nose volunteer parent supporter, to be very helpful.

**Red Nose Bereavement Support Services** We support anyone affected by the loss of a pregnancy, stillbirth or the death of a baby or child.

**24/7 Support Line** 1300 308 307

[support@rednose.org.au](mailto:support@rednose.org.au)

**Support Library** [rednosegriefandloss.org.au](http://rednosegriefandloss.org.au)



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