Key messages

- There are many reasons why teenagers become pregnant.
- There are three options for someone when they find out they become pregnant: parenting, adoption or termination of pregnancy.
- There have recently been changes in WA to the laws regarding termination of pregnancies.

Unplanned pregnancy

Some reasons why teenagers become pregnant:

- failure of contraceptive method(s)
- inaccessible contraceptive methods – psychological, geographical or financial
- lack of information – too little or inaccurate information on reproductive cycle and methods of contraception
- belief that 'it won't happen to me'
- fear of parents/guardian finding out about contraceptive use is more immediate than fear of pregnancy
- pressure from partner to have unprotected sex
- ambivalence about using contraception
- media or peer influence

Planned pregnancy

In some cases, teenagers plan to become pregnant. Reasons for this may include:

- a wish to express their parenting needs
- start a family
- having a baby will help fulfil emotional needs

In any case, provision of strong and ongoing support for the pregnant young person can assist them to make informed decisions about their options.

Continue the pregnancy

The WA Department of Education has guidelines for schools to support students who are pregnant or parenting to continue their education. The Department is involved in programs and partnerships in the metropolitan area to facilitate access to school for young parents and pregnant teenagers, through the School of Isolated and Distance Education.

Parenting

Many pregnant young people continue with the pregnancy. It is important that they are supported and linked in with services, this can be arranged through antenatal care.

Adoption

Adoptive Services within the Department of Communities is the only agency authorised to arrange adoptions. A delegate from Department of Communities will meet with the birth parents so they can understand the process and provide support.

Termination of pregnancy (abortion)

The law

People in Western Australia have been legally able to obtain a safe termination of pregnancy, i.e. a medical abortion, since 1998. The laws in WA changed in 2024 to reduce the barriers to access termination.

What if someone is under 18 years old?

If someone is pregnant and under the age of 18 years old, the health professional will assess them to ensure they understand the procedure and have sufficient maturity. If the health professional deems them mature enough to make decisions about their health care, they can access an abortion. It is up to the under 18-year-old to determine if they want their parent/s or guardian/s involved.

If the under 18-year-old is assessed not able to make this medical decision, the following options are:

- the under 18-year-old allows the health professional to speak to their parent/s or guardian/s about the decision.
- the under 18-year-old refuses to allow the health professional to speak to their parent/s or guardian/s about the decision. The health professional may apply to the Supreme or Family Court of WA for a decision on whether the abortion should occur.[2]

The procedure

Abortions are a safe medical procedure, when done by a trained health professional. No deaths from abortion have been recorded in Australia since 1970 and abortions do not impact a person's ability to get pregnant in the future when conducted by a trained health practitioner.

There are two options available in WA: medical abortion and surgical abortion.

Medical abortion - Using medication to end the pregnancy. This is only available in the first 9 weeks of pregnancy.

Surgical abortion - A procedure which removes the pregnancy tissue via suction. No surgery or cutting occurs despite the name.

References

1. Abortion in Western Australia. Western Australian Department of Health. Available from: Abortion in Western Australia (healthywa.wa.gov.au)

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- Pregnancy and birth

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