

IMPROVEMENTS IN MEDICAL ABORTION REGIMENS

Medical abortion regimens using mifepristone with misoprostol and misoprostol alone are quickly gaining support worldwide as safe and effective alternatives to surgical abortion. However, it is widely believed that the most frequently registered regimen may not be ideal for use in a range of settings. Refinements to the standard regimen of mifepristone and misoprostol, including lowering the dose of mifepristone, repeating doses of misoprostol and offering women the option to administer their misoprostol at home, promise to increase access to this method while sustaining high safety, efficacy and acceptability profiles. Each of these refinements may also lower the costs of providing safe abortion services.

What is mifepristone? Mifepristone is an antiprogesterin. When taken orally during the first trimester of pregnancy, mifepristone blocks receptors of the hormone progesterone. As a result, the lining of the uterus can no longer sustain the growing embryo. Mifepristone also increases prostaglandin levels and dilates the cervix, facilitating abortion.

What is misoprostol? Misoprostol is an E₁ prostaglandin analog that is marketed worldwide for the treatment and prevention of gastric ulcers. It is widely used “off-label” for a number of reproductive health indications. It induces uterine contractions, facilitating the emptying of the uterus.

Why is medical abortion a good method for low resource countries?

- Medical abortion is a simple, easy to use method that can be adapted quite well in low resource settings
- The drug used is stable at ambient temperatures and does not require special storage facilities
- Surgical skills are not needed, so safe medical abortions can be delivered by a larger pool of providers
- Women and providers may prefer this non-surgical option

How can the regimen be improved?

- By reducing doses of mifepristone and misoprostol, thereby reducing the cost of the method
- By offering home administration of misoprostol entailing fewer clinic visits
- By implementing improvements to misoprostol dosage, timing and route that may increase efficacy and decrease time to abortion completion

Some current projects:

- Studies testing home use of misoprostol with mifepristone medical abortion in a range of settings
- Clinical trials of variants in dosage and route of misoprostol administration with mifepristone medical abortion
- Clinical trials to investigate use of medical abortion at later gestational ages
- Information-sharing via creation and dissemination of an Instructions for Use document on misoprostol alone for medical abortion
- Policy meetings in the United States and internationally to share information about clinical refinements to the methods