

Doctors for Choice UK position statement: Time limits

Doctors for Choice UK are in favour of removing arbitrary restrictions on access to abortion and believe that a decision to have an abortion should be made on an individual basis, by women and pregnant people, with the support of healthcare professionals when wanted or needed.

UK abortion law imposes a general time limit of 24 weeks, with the only exceptions being when there is a risk of death or grave permanent injury to the pregnant person, or in cases of serious fetal abnormality.

Although the vast majority of abortions are performed before 10 weeks of pregnancy (87% in 2021), some people need abortions at later pregnancy durations.

The reasons for this include:

- Significant change in social circumstances e.g. following a relationship breakdown, job loss, or an existing child or family member becoming seriously ill.
- Delays in recognising the pregnancy e.g. in very young women, perimenopausal women, with contraception failure, women addicted to drugs or alcohol, women with mental health problems or learning disability.
- Difficulties in accessing abortion e.g. delays in referral to an abortion clinic or obtaining two doctors signatures (as required by current law).
- People with medical problems that need referral to NHS or specialist services for an abortion, where there can be long waiting times (these people may have presented well before the legal time limit but can still have difficulties accessing treatment in time).
- Hidden pregnancy e.g. in the very young or those in abusive relationships.
- Fetal abnormalities (some of which will not be detected until the '20-week' scan).
- People who are unsure about whether they want to be pregnant and need time to make a decision.

Legal time limits are strict and absolute, and ultimately mean that some people will be forced to continue with pregnancies they do not want, which can lead to significant psychological harm. Furthermore, people presenting for abortion at later pregnancy

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durations are more likely to be vulnerable, meaning strict time limits for them can be particularly harmful. We believe that requests for abortion at later pregnancy durations should be managed on an individual basis, with the support of local and national guidelines and regulations on best practice, and a mutli-disciplinary team approach where appropriate.

We are in favour of removing arbitrary time limits for abortion. Evidence from places where abortion has been decriminalised, such as Canada and some Australian States, shows that this would not lead to a significant increase in the number of abortions performed or the number of people having abortions after the current 24 week limit. But it would allow for a small number of people, often presenting in crisis, to be able to access the help they need.

Ultimately, Doctors for Choice UK:

- Trust women and pregnant people to make responsible decisions about their own lives and health.
- Believe that it is not the role of healthcare providers to act as gatekeepers to abortion but to provide care and support should women or pregnant people want or need this.