



# Prescribe Choice

## Understanding Mifepristone

### What is Mifepristone?

Mifepristone (formerly known as RU 486) is a safe, effective method for terminating a pregnancy through a medical—rather than a surgical—abortion. A woman can take mifepristone as soon as she knows she is pregnant. It is administered orally, is non-invasive, requires no anesthesia, and bears no risk of infection. Also known as the “abortion pill,” mifepristone is approved as a method of early abortion within the first 7 weeks of pregnancy in the United States. It is used up to the 9th week of pregnancy in the United Kingdom.

### How Does Mifepristone Work?

After a counseling session and an exam, a patient takes three 200 mg mifepristone tablets which block the effects of progesterone, cause the uterus to shed its lining, and expel the embryo. If the abortion does not occur within two days, the patient takes misoprostol to induce the expulsion of the embryo. A **follow-up visit** is necessary after two weeks to confirm that the abortion has been completed. A surgical abortion is required in the case of an incomplete medical abortion, which occurs in less than 5% of cases. The combination of mifepristone and misoprostol is more than **95% effective** in terminating a pregnancy within the first 7 weeks.

### Mifepristone is Safe and Effective

Mifepristone has been used safely and effectively by over one million women since 1988. It is even safer than (the already extremely safe) surgical abortion and has minimal side-effects. Mifepristone has symptoms similar to those associated with a miscarriage, such as cramping, heavy bleeding, nausea, and diarrhea. Providers can help manage the side effects and address possible complications. According to a 1998 study by the Population Council, 96% of women who used mifepristone said they would recommend it to others.

### FDA Approval of Mifepristone: Victory for Women's Health

Mifepristone was developed in France and was first approved for use there in 1988. Twelve years later, in September 2000, the FDA approved mifepristone for sale in the US under the brand name Mifeprex™. Mifepristone is now available in most of the European Union, China, Taiwan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Israel, New Zealand, South Africa, and Russia as a method of early abortion. Medical abortion with mifepristone offers women more privacy than surgical abortion and allows women greater control in ending a pregnancy. In addition, mifepristone has the **potential to expand access to safe, legal abortion** in the US since many doctors who do not currently perform surgical abortions say they would administer mifepristone. Currently, **86% of US counties do not have an abortion provider**, leaving too many women with no safe or legal options for terminating an unintended pregnancy.

### Mifepristone Has Other Possible Medical Uses Beyond Medical Abortion

Initial studies show mifepristone has the potential to treat some types of **breast cancer, uterine fibroid tumors, ovarian cancer, endometriosis, depression, meningioma, and Cushing's syndrome**, among other diseases. However, anti-abortion politics has brought mifepristone research for non-abortion indication, until very recently, to a virtual standstill. Increased funding is necessary to expand research and further develop other possible uses of mifepristone.

### Young Women Need Increased Access to Mifepristone

Unfortunately, many of the same obstacles to obtaining a surgical abortion exist with mifepristone, such as cost, distance of clinics, lack of providers, and anti-abortion laws and policies. Often because of misconceptions about mifepristone and pressure from anti-choice groups, many doctors, clinics, and college health centers that are qualified to provide medical abortions, do not offer mifepristone. The FDA requires that mifepristone be administered by a doctor who can accurately date a pregnancy, diagnose an ectopic (tubal) pregnancy, and provide surgical intervention or a surgical referral if the medical abortion fails.