

Guide to a free and responsible motherhood

In compliance to the World Health Organisation's guidelines and Planned Parenthood

a cura di Federica Gaida

I have the right to choose.
I have the right to be happy.

Every woman has the right to enjoy a safe and gratifying sexual life, has the right to have children and the freedom to choose whether, when and how many children to have.

The freedom to choose whether and when to become a mother is protected by the Italian State. So it is up to you to choose in a free and responsible way the number of children you would like to have and when you would like to have them and whether to discuss your choice with your companion, if you have one.

Birth Control

In order to plan your maternity in a free and responsible way, you can make use of a wide range of birth control or contraceptive methods, which you can choose according to your needs.

Contraceptives: why should I use them?

There are many advantages of making use of birth control. Contraceptives allow you:

- 1) to enjoy your sexuality fully without fear of unwanted pregnancies or pregnancies that may place your health at risk.
- 2) to protect yourself, especially by using the condom, not only against unwanted pregnancies but also against infection by dangerous diseases such as hepatitis B, herpes viruses and AIDS. It also helps you fight other diseases that affect women.
- 3) to delay the birth of your first child and to space the birth of the following children so as:
 - to improve your quality of life and reduce your family budget pressures
 - to have time to complete your education or professional training
 - to dedicate more time and energy to the children you truly desired to have

Which contraceptive should I use?

A variety of contraceptive methods exist (see box on next page), each with advantages and disadvantages. The ideal contraceptive, a method that is effective and at the same time safe, comfortable, without side effects, and simple to use doesn't exist yet.

In order to choose the right contraceptive for your needs, consider which of these aspects are

most important for you:

- 1) **Effectiveness:** How well does it protect you against the risk of undesired pregnancy? How important is its correct and consistent use? Does it protect you from sexually transmitted diseases?
- 2) **Duration:** is it a short or long term method? Is it permanent and irreversible? Will it allow you to have children afterwards? Is it easy to start and easy to quit?
- 3) **Side effects:** are there problems or diseases that you might have that may hinder you from using it? Can you use it while breastfeeding? Does it cause physical and psychological diseases? If yes, do they last only for the first few months or throughout the whole period you'll be using it?
- 4) **Ease and comfort:** is it complicated to use? Do you have to use it every time you're having intercourse or does it have a continuous effect? Do you have to do anything before having intercourse? Does it require your partner's cooperation? Does it require a medical prescription or a medical visit? Does it suit your lifestyle? Is it expensive?

IMPORTANT!

Only the condom protects you from undesired pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), or venereal diseases, are infectious diseases transmitted from one person to the other through sexual contact due to the presence of infected germs in the genital secretions and or blood.

The most dangerous STDs can be transmitted

through any sexual activity that involves contact between the penis, vagina, anus and or mouth. In order to protect yourself against STDs, use the condom or avoid any contact with the genital area (including oral or anal sex).

In the following section you will find a list of the most widespread contraception methods in Italy. The effectiveness rate shown next to the name of the method makes a distinction between the theoretical effectiveness rate which relies on a perfect use of the method, correct and consistent, and the real effectiveness rate, which follows a typical use of the method and is in reality is much lower, since it takes into consideration human factors that can lead to an incorrect use of the method.

Your contraceptive choices

THE PILL:

(real effectiveness rate 92% theoretical effectiveness rate 99,7%)

The pill is a medicine containing two hormones – estrogen and progesterone - which are similar to the natural hormones women produce in their ovaries. It creates a situation similar to pregnancy by hindering ovulation (release of an egg by the ovary). The pill is an oral contraceptive, that must be taken **every day**, with a one-week pause every 3 weeks, during which the method remains effective. The pill is highly effective, if taken consistently and correctly.

The new versions contain lower doses of estrogen, reducing the side effects (weight gain, upset stomach). A medical prescription is required and must be reissued every few months (the prescription has an expiry date). The pill cannot be taken during breastfeeding.

THE RING (NUVARING):

(real effectiveness rate 92% theoretical effectiveness rate 99,7%)

Nuvaring is a new method of contraception. It

is a soft, flexible, transparent ring that is worn in the vagina. It is made of non-allergic, non-toxic and bio-compatible material. It has a diameter of about 5 cm and is 4mm thick.

It works the same way a pill does: a combination of estrogen and progesterone is released from the ring in a continuous and constant manner directly into the blood stream through the vaginal wall, stopping ovulation.

The ring is soft, flexible, comfortable and is easy to inset and remove. It doesn't need to be placed in a specific position in order to work. The level of protection is similar to that of the pill, but it is used **only once a month** and since the hormones are absorbed directly into the blood stream, the side effects are lower. It does not interfere with intercourse and there is no risk of losing it while doing sports.

THE PATCH (EVRA):

(real effectiveness rate 92% theoretical effectiveness rate 99,7%)

Evra is a new hormonal contraceptive that releases estrogen and progesterone through a polyester patch. Once applied on the skin, the hormones are slowly absorbed through the skin, and pass into the bloodstream. The patch may be applied on the abdomen, buttocks, on the outside of the upper arm, thighs or upper body (not on the breasts)

The patch adheres well on the skin, allowing you to take a shower, swim, and exercise without problems. Should the adhesive part get wet, the patch must be thrown away and replaced with a new one without interfering with the effectiveness of the contraceptive. The patch must be replaced every **seven days** with a one-week break every three weeks. During this break the contraceptive maintains its fully effectiveness.

Unlike the pill and similar to the Ring, the Patch is not absorbed by the digestive system, thus it

yields lower side effects while the level of protection is the same.

THE INTRAUTERINE DEVICE (IUD):

(real effectiveness rate 92% theoretical effectiveness rate 99,7%)

The IUD is a small plastic and copper device that is put into your womb. It prevents sperm from joining with an egg and alters the lining of the uterus, preventing the implantation of a fertilized egg. It must be fitted by a gynecologist. An IUD can be left in place for a very long time (the most recent types even **up to 10 years**) without need of periodic check-ups. It must be removed by a gynecologist.

The following complications do require a medical check-up:

- Pain, bleeding or spotting between periods or after sexual intercourse
- Strong stomach-ache
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Unusual vaginal discharges
- The IUD strings are either missing, shorter or longer
- You can feel part of the IUD while controlling the strings.

The IUD is one of the most effective methods of birth control and once inserted, you don't have to think about it anymore.

There are frequent side effects (pelvic pains, heavy periods and occasional spotting) but they tend to disappear 2-3 months after insertion.

THE DIAPHRAGM

(real effectiveness rate 84% theoretical effectiveness rate 99,2%)

The diaphragm is a dome-shaped soft rubber cup with a flexible rim. It is smeared with spermicide or contraceptive jelly or foam and inserted into the vagina **before every intercourse**. The diaphragm must remain in place for six hours

after intercourse. It acts as a physical barrier between the vagina and the uterus and keeps the spermicide in direct contact with the cervix.

A gynecological visit is required in order to select the type and the size of the diaphragm which best fits your vagina. You can interrupt its use at anytime. It offers high protection but must be used during at every intercourse and must be inserted correctly.

CONDOM:

(real effectiveness rate 85% theoretical effectiveness rate 98%)

A condom is a very thin latex or plastic sheath fitted over a man's erect penis before sexual intercourse, to keep sperm from penetrating into the vagina.

Condom is the only birth control method that is effective against many sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS

It protects the man from infection by preventing direct contact between the penis and cervical, vaginal and anal secretions or wounds. It protects the woman from infection by preventing contact with infected sperms, urethral secretions or penis wounds.

In order to be effective against pregnancy and against infection by HIV/AIDS, condoms must be properly stored and used correctly during each sexual intercourse (oral, vaginal or anal).

Improper use of the condom, defects in production or storage under inappropriate conditions can make condoms break, leak or slip off.

Apart from abstinence, condom remains the most effective device for protection against all sexually transmitted diseases.

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING METHODS:

(real effectiveness rate 75% theoretical effectiveness rate 91-99%)

Natural family planning methods are those

methods (Basal Body Temperature-BBT, Ogino-Knaus, Billings) based on abstinence from sexual intercourse or use of condoms during a woman's fertile period. The fertile periods are calculated differently depending on the method used.

This method is not very effective, especially due to the difficulties in recognizing fertility signs and the possibility of irregular periods. The cooperation of your partner is necessary.

WITHDRAWAL:

(real effectiveness rate 73% theoretical effectiveness rate 96%)

With this method the man pulls his penis out of the vagina before "coming" so to keep sperm from joining egg. It is the most widespread method, but its effectiveness relies heavily on proper use.

The great number of undesired pregnancies that come as a result of withdrawal, is not due to the fact that the man does not know how or when to pull it out, but because some semen frequently escapes from the penis before actual ejaculation. This can happen at any time during sexual intercourse.

STERILIZATION:

(effectiveness rate in women 99,5% effectiveness rate in men 99,9%)

Sterilization is a surgical operation that **permanently** blocks your ability to reproduce.

Female sterilization, or Tubal sterilization, closes off the fallopian tubes, where the egg is fertilized by sperm.

Male sterilization, or Vasectomy, cuts and close off the tubes that carry sperm into the seminal liquid. Sterilization is carried out in clinics or hospitals, with low traumatizing techniques under partial anesthesia with day hospital admittance. It is normally chosen by those who already have the ideal number of children and

do not want to have any more.

This single procedure can provide highly effective protection against pregnancy for the remainder of your reproductive years, without side effects and without having to use methods which can be less practical for your lifestyle.

Sterilization does not affect your normal sex functions (erection, ejaculation) or sexual pleasure, but does not protect you against sexually transmitted diseases.

Remember that sterilization is a **permanent** method of contraception whose choice must be properly meditated.

Consider all the other options before going for sterilization. Many methods of reversible birth control guarantee a level of protection of up to 90% (pills, IUD), and most women can make use of them with low risk of complications or side effects. Some have less if no side effects at all (condoms, diaphragm, abstinence).

Your decision not to have children must be definitive. You must be absolutely sure that you will not change your mind or regret your decision in the future - no matter how your life may change. Discuss it with your companion and think well of what this choice would mean to you and to your relationship.

EMERGENCY OR "MORNING-AFTER" CONTRACEPTION

The "morning after" pill is not a birth control method and it must only be used in case of emergency. It consists of high doses of estrogen and progestin to be taken exceptionally after unprotected sex. The tablets are to be taken possibly **within 48 hours, or at the most 72 hours** after unprotected intercourse. If properly used, the pill has 75% effectiveness level.

A valid alternative is to insert an IUD within 5 days after the unprotected intercourse. In this case the rate of effectiveness is about 99%.

What if I'm pregnant?

“What if I'm pregnant?” is a question women ask themselves countless times throughout their lifetime - especially when their period is late.

Initially, signs of a possible pregnancy are: your period is late or you missed it altogether, your breasts feel tender, you're suffering from nausea or vomit, you're gaining weight, you feel tired and moody, you have to urinate often, you have food cravings.

Later on, you'll notice the following: enlarged breasts, darkening of nipples, heavy vaginal discharges, swollen abdomen, abdominal movements.

If you think you could be pregnant, you should try to reflect right now on some crucial questions you'll have to answer to in a free and responsible manner.

- Are you ready to have a baby at this time?
- Could you raise the child with the father? Would it be the best choice for you?
- Would raising the child alone be the right thing to do? Would you be able to?
- Would it be better to consider foster parents or to place the child for adoption?
- Is abortion an option you want to consider?

There is no right or wrong answer. Every woman and every situation is different.

But first of all, you want to make sure that you are really pregnant.

How can I make sure that I'm pregnant?

Have you missed your period? If you've had intercourse without using contraceptives or if you rely on withdrawal or natural planning, it is likely that you are pregnant.

You can find out whether you are pregnant by

carrying out a urine test from the first day you missed your expected period.

You can do the test at home by buying a kit from the pharmacy (its cost generally doesn't exceed 15 euros), or go to a public medical laboratory (with your doctor's prescription) or to a private laboratory.

The pregnancy test kits sold in the pharmacy are urine testers that detect the presence of the hCG hormone (that is not present in a woman who is not pregnant) in the urine sample.

Most pregnancy tests function in the same way. All you have to do is dip the test into a container of urine or place it under a flow of urine and read the results after about 3 minutes. A blue line or a cross will appear revealing whether you are pregnant or not (the signs can differ depending on the tester's mark). In case of a mistake, it will remain blank.

In a few minutes you'll obtain a result which is 99% reliable, but you'll have to follow the indications on the kit carefully in order to have an accurate result.

The result is final if the outcome is positive. On the contrary, it may result negative (even in case of pregnancy) if the test is done too early in your pregnancy or if the tester has past its expiration date.

Most of the testers are reliable stating from the first day of your missed period. If the first result was negative but you still have doubts, re-do the test after 3 days.

Usually women take the test at home and then repeat it in a laboratory just to make sure.

If your test is positive, you'll need to take a pel-

vic exam. The doctor will measure your uterus to find out how long you've been pregnant. At that point you'll have to decide on what to do.

I'm pregnant: what choices do I have?

Finding out that you are pregnant might overwhelm you with joy and emotion, but on some occasions finding out that you are pregnant can make you desperate.

If you are pregnant, you have three choices:

- You can choose to have the baby and raise it yourself
- You can choose to have the baby and to entrust it to a foster family or place it for adoption
- You can decide to end your pregnancy

There isn't a choice applicable to all. You have to decide which one is best for you. It is not easy to decide. Make sure you consider different aspects:

Ask yourself:

- Can I comfortably live with this choice?
- Which choice would be impossible for me to take?
- How would each of these choices affect my daily life?
- What would each of these choices mean to the people who are closest to me?
- What are my future plans?
- What are my moral and spiritual values?

Talk about your feelings with your partner, a

family member or a trusted friend - someone who can offer you support. Alternatively, discuss your alternatives with a counselor at your family planning centre. The counselor will help you overcome pressures forcing you to make a decision against your wish.

How much time do I have to decide?

If you've decided to become a mother and would therefore like to carry on with your pregnancy, as soon as possible you should visit a family planning center (you'll find a list in this book) or see your trusted gynecologist, who will prescribe you all the tests required to make sure that everything is alright.

If you are considering to end your pregnancy, you must decide as soon as possible. Today abortion is safe, but the risks increase as time goes by. Also, the Italian State guarantees the right to abortion only within the first 90 days from conception.

While deciding on what to do, take care of yourself. If you'll decide to have a baby, it is important for you to lead a healthy life.

Eat in a healthy and natural way - lots of fruits and fresh vegetables; bread, rice, pasta, cereals; avoid fried foods and sweets; don't eat raw fish and meat. Keep yourself in shape, exercise daily. Have enough rest during the day and sleep well at night. Do not drink alcohol and do not smoke. Do not take medicine - even a simple aspirin - without consulting your doctor.

I would like to keep my baby

If I decide to become a mother, what help will I get from Italy?

If you've decided to become a mother, the Italian State will help you keep your baby by guaranteeing your job, providing medical, financial and logistical assistance, and lastly, if you don't have a Permit of Stay, by forbidding your expulsion.

What medical assistance am I entitled to?

In Italy, a pregnant woman, whether Italian or foreign, is entitled to free medical checkups during different stages of her pregnancy.

The nine-month pregnancy period is broken down into weeks, and each of them requires specific to check the your state of health and that of your baby.

The basic tests are free (your family doctor has a list of the required tests).

Many specialist tests however are not free and are to be paid by the future mothers, with the exception of those specialist examinations that must be carried out if your doctor fears that there might be malformations in the fetus.

Therefore, if you are over 35; if you've had a child affected by chromosomal diseases; or if ultrasound examination reveals malformations, the doctor generally prescribes specialist tests such as amniocentesis or Chorionic Villus Sampling (CVS), to ascertain the risk of chromosomal diseases and especially the Down syndrome.

After your child is born, you are entitled to free pediatric visits and laboratory examinations until the child is six years old.

All checkups have to be prescribed by your family doctor and have to be taken at the public

medical institutions (hospitals and clinics) or at any private medical institutions in operating within the National Health Service.

What guarantee do I have as far as work is concerned?

If you have a subordinate work contract and you are pregnant, you cannot be fired until your baby turns one year old, unless the firm you are working for ceases operations, you've committed a serious mistake at work that justifies your dismissal, or your contract has already expired. If you are pregnant, you are entitled to paid leave for medical visits or specialist examinations. In order to be granted leaves, you have to present certificates showing the date and time of medical visits.

You have the right and the obligation to abstain from work two months before giving birth and three months after giving birth. However, you have the possibility of working even up to a month before giving birth providing that a medical certificate shows that your pregnancy is in order and that the working conditions are not dangerous. Leave periods are considered like working periods and are therefore taken into consideration while calculating your seniority at work.

During maternity leave, the law states that you are entitled to earn 80% of your usual salary, whether you are a subordinate worker or self-employed worker (artisan, businessperson, farmer, agricultural entrepreneur). If you are a subordinate worker, the national collective agreement for your category may state that you be paid the whole salary.

Apart from the right to stay home for the first three months after giving birth, you have the

possibility of abstaining from work for a maximum period of six months. If you are a single parent, then this is extended to ten months during which you are entitled to a pay equivalent to 30% of your salary.

After giving birth, as a subordinate worker, you are entitled to day rests that allow you to nurse your baby or simply to stay close to the baby: two hours a day for a six or more hour working day, an hour a day for a less than six hour working day.

If you have twins, the rest hours are double and can be used temporarily by both parents.

Finally, both the mother and the father can, even if they used up their leave, abstain from work and be paid in case the baby is sick. During the child's first three years, you are entitled to 30 days leave a year, which can be split up, while from three to eight years each parent is entitled to 5 days leave a year.

In many cases, the national collective agreements state that leave can only be paid for the child's first three years.

If I'm unemployed, what assistance can I receive?

In order to safeguard maternity, the Italian law provides working women with maternity benefits from INPS or other social security institutions during pregnancy.

If you are unemployed or a housewife - either an Italian or a foreigner with a Carta di Soggiorno (Permanent Resident Permit) - after the birth of the baby and within the child's first six months, you can apply for a maternity allowance of 258 euros a month.

The URP offices in the districts or different CAF (Fiscal Assistance Centres) offices in your

area provide information on how to apply and receive the maternity allowance.

If you don't have a family and are having serious financial problems, whether you are an Italian or a foreigner, you can go to the Municipality's Social Service Departments and ask for help in finding accommodation in a family residence during your pregnancy and immediately after and receive financial help after the birth of your child.

What happens if I don't have a Permit of Stay?

If you are pregnant and you don't have a Permit of Stay, **you cannot be expelled** from Italy until your baby becomes six months old. During that period, neither your husband can be expelled if he is in the country illegally and is living with you.

You also are entitled to apply for a "**permesso di soggiorno per motivi di gravidanza**" (**Permit of Stay for pregnancy**) at the Questura (Police Station). You'll have to state your personal data and where you live and provide six passport size photos, a € 14,62 revenue stamp, and a certificate showing you are pregnant and the expected date of birth. This certificate has to be issued by a doctor from Local Health Offices (ASL), or by a doctor from your family planning clinic.

Once you've obtained the Permit of Stay, you can **register at the National Health Service**, which will enable you to be exempted from paying all medical checkups and laboratory tests required for safeguarding your pregnancy. You should, however, remember that the Permit of Stay for pregnancy doesn't allow you to leave the Italian territory, to work and above all, cannot be converted into any other type of Permit, except for exceptional cases.

What choices do I have if I choose to raising my baby?

There are two ways of raising your baby: with your partner or as a single parent yourself.

ESTABLISHING A FAMILY

Most of us would like to find a lifelong companion with whom to establish a family, share its pleasures, responsibilities and difficulties.

According to Italian law, the real and legitimate family is that founded on marriage, in which a husband and wife assume rights and duties towards each other and towards their children.

Of late the Italian justice has been moving towards judicial recognition of committed relationships between two people who are not married, but love each other and live together in a steady way. Such is the case of the so-called *de facto* family or co-habitation *more uxorio*.

As far as the rights of children and their protection by the law are concerned, there is no difference between children born of married couples and those of cohabiting couples.

With or without marriage, a relationship between a couple can turn out successful if each partner is committed to making it successful and if both understands what each expects from the relationship.

Remember however that while a baby can bring joy and much satisfaction, it can also place much pressure on even the best relationship. If your commitment isn't a solid one, your relationship could break down.

If you choose to raise your child with your partner, and you would like to consider the possibility of marrying or cohabiting with him, ask yourself:

- are your parents or his are putting pressure on you to get married
- are you are emotionally and financially ready to establish a family

- do you know what to expect from each other
- would marriage make you feel less guilty as far as sex is concerned
- is he aware of the duty of sharing with you the responsibility of taking care of the children and the home
- are you ready to become a single parent should your relationship fail

Reflect on the answers you've given and discuss them with your partner, family member or family counselor.

Raising your baby by yourself

The challenge of raising a baby alone can be exciting and can bring a lot of satisfaction, but it is in any case a great responsibility.

It will be much easier to face if you find all the help possible. Let your relatives and trusted friends know that you rely on their support before deciding to go for it alone.

Even with the help of family and friends, raising a baby as a single mother is a big challenge. Your child's needs will change continuously and likewise your capacity to meet them.

Your baby will need your love and dedication throughout the whole day, every day. You'll get much joy in helping your baby grow up to become a happy, independent and responsible adult. But there will be constant and continuous need of your commitment and your free time will be restricted.

Raising a baby is expensive. Making a living for your baby and yourself will be a big challenge even if you have a job and assistance from the State.

On the other hand, raising a baby as a single parent means not having to make compromises by choosing a wrong companion. It means you can raise your baby as you choose - with your values, your principles, your faith, while respecting your child's inclination.

What if I don't want or I cannot raise the baby myself?

Once you've given birth, you have the right to choose, within ten days from the birth, whether to recognize your baby or not, whether to assume the responsibility of raising him or whether to give him first to the Italian institutions and then to adoptive parents.

Adoption

If you've decided to give birth to your baby but don't want to keep him or it's impossible for you to raise the child, you have the right to decline to recognize the child legally and then to give it in an absolutely confidential manner to an adoptive family that would welcome the baby as if it were their own child.

It is a difficult choice, but many women who place their children in adoption are happy to know that their child will be loved and will live in a happy and harmonious environment.

It is not a crime not to recognize the baby you've given birth to. The law tries as much as possible to facilitate this choice.

All you need is to inform the doctors before giving birth that you do not intend to recognize the newborn baby. No authority will be informed about the birth and your name will not appear on the birth certificate. This will make it impossible for you to be identified as the baby's mother.

All the hospital staff and social assistants will have the duty of keeping this information absolutely confidential both in the hospital and outside.

And if the father wants to recognize the baby, his decision in no way will lead to your iden-

tification.

So, if you've decided to place the baby for adoption, you will give birth in an absolutely confidential manner: no one will know that you've given birth and that you are the mother of that child.

You will not be forced to give birth alone without medical assistance and you'll not have to feel ashamed or hide, or worse still, to abandon your baby by the roadside.

And should you have doubts or hesitations after giving birth, you are entitled to a period of reflection and to decide peacefully and freely whether to recognize the baby.

The hospital will assign you a social assistant who will help and inform you of the help you can rely on in case, should you recognize your baby or not.

If within ten days you'll not have recognized your baby, the hospital will assign the newborn to the Juvenile Court, receive a name from the Registry office of the Municipality in which the birth took place, and acquire Italian citizenship.

Within a short time, about ten days, the newborn will be given to a family for adoption and this family will take care of him, recognizing the child legally as their legitimate child.

Foster Care

If you are undergoing a difficult period (sickness, imprisonment, financial or educational difficulties, etc.) and at the moment you are not capable of taking care of your child, as an alternative to adoption you can temporarily entrust

your child to a foster family capable of providing for it, giving it an education and all the love it needs.

You can avail yourself of a foster family during the day or part-time (when it is limited to some hours in a day), or in a residential manner (when the minor goes to live for a set period with the foster family, while at the same time maintaining contacts and meeting with his natural family).

The baby can be entrusted to either relatives or third parties (third parties means families that are not related to the baby). The local Social

service department will identify amongst the potential families, the most appropriate one for the needs of your child and your family.

Placing your child for care in a foster family can only be temporary (from a few months to 2 or 3 years, with a possibility of renewal).

It is upon you to decide with the family you are entrusting the baby to, the days and hours during which you'll go to visit your baby and you must make a commitment to solve your problems within a reasonable time.

It is important to remember that foster families are a temporary service and is not adoption.

I can't want a child. What can I do?

Your decision to have a child or not to have one is free and personal.

If for some reason you don't want or you cannot keep your pregnancy, the Italian law guarantees you freedom of choice.

Abortion has been legal in Italy since 1978.

All foreign women, even those without Permit of Stay, can make use of Italian facilities without any costs.

Abortion

WHO DECIDES TO ABORT?

The decision to terminate pregnancy is always a very difficult and dramatic decision in a woman's life, and no woman can face it superficially and lightly.

The most common reasons that can lead you to abort are:

- You don't feel ready to become a mother
- You can't afford to raise a child
- You don't want to be a single parent
- You don't want it to be known that you are pregnant
- You don't want to have other children
- Your husband, companion or parents want you to abort
- You or the fetus have health problems
- You were a victim of rape or incest

If you find out that you are pregnant and for personal reasons decide not to carry on with your pregnancy, the Italian law gives you the **possibility of aborting within the first 90 days of conception** (calculated from the day you had the last menstrual period).

IF I DECIDE TO ABORT, WHAT STEPS SHOULD I FOLLOW?

The Italian State guarantees the right of abortion only within the first 90 days of conception, so if you are considering terminating your pregnancy, you must decide as soon as possible. Abortion is now safe, but the risks increase the longer you wait.

The first thing to do is **to go a trusted doctor**: the gynecologist of the family planning centre, your family doctor or any other doctor you trust.

The law obliges the doctor to examine other possibilities than abortion with you. Your doctor will have to inform you of your rights if you decide to carry on with the pregnancy and explain to you the support you can receive from the State if you decide to raise the baby. Otherwise he'll tell you how to proceed with adoption if you would like to give birth without recognizing the baby. If you want, your partner can also take part in this discussion.

Many family planning clinics assign pregnant women with difficulties a social assistant or a psychologist, especially if the request is motivated by financial, social, family or health problems. This is only a proposal and not obligatory, and in any case, your identity and that of the person you indicate as the father will be kept confidential.

A discussion with a counselor would be precious to you at this critical moment, helping you better understand the ideas and things you want and can do, especially if you feel forced to give up a child you desire.

The counselor will discuss with you the reasons that led you to want to end the pregnancy, will try helping you overcome those reasons, will help you reclaim your rights as a working woman and mother, and will offer you all the necessary support before and after giving birth. At the end of the meeting, the law states that the doctor has to give you a **7 day period of reflection** and he has to issue you a certificate showing you've had the meeting. This period is for helping you further reflect on your decision. Remember though that you can at any time change your mind and decide not to terminate your pregnancy - even while on the operation bed.

However should the doctor discover urgent need for abortion, he can free you from the obligatory 7 day reflection period and issue you a certificate indicating "urgent" need for abortion.

WHAT MUST I DO IF I'M A MINOR?

If you are a minor and would like to involve your parents in your decision, they'll have to accompany you to the doctor and sign the certificate with you.

But if you can't or wouldn't like to talk with your parents, the best thing is for you to go the nearest family planning clinic. There, a social assistant or a psychologist will contact the Juvenile Court that will nominate a guardian judge who will sign on behalf of your parents the authorization to abortion.

Remember that throughout this process, no one is authorized to contact your parents without your knowledge; neither the clinic, the judge, nor the hospital where you'll have the abortion.

WHAT ARE THE TIME LIMITS FOR TERMINATING PREGNANCY?

According to Italian law, abortion is only allowed **within the first 90 days of pregnancy** (that is, from the first day of the last menstrual

period) which, according to the first ultrasound examination, corresponds to the 12 weeks and 6 days.

Nevertheless, abortion can be done **even after the first 90 days if the pregnancy or birth can cause serious problems to the woman's health**. The same can be done in case abnormalities or malformations detected in the fetus may cause serious physical and psychic problems to the woman.

In the case of abortion after the first 90 days of pregnancy, abortion becomes considered a therapy (**therapeutic abortion**).

You'll have to undergo all the medical checkups and specialist visits which your gynecologist will prescribe. In this case your gynecologist assumes responsibility for the operation.

WHERE CAN I BOOK APPOINTMENT FOR ABORTION?

With a medical certificate, you'll be able to book appointment for terminating pregnancy on any date after the 7-day reflection period in a public hospital or in a clinic authorized by the Region (the last possibility is only applicable to those who decide to abort with 90 days of conception).

While it is better to carry out abortion as soon as possible, most often, due to long waiting lists, and the unjustifiable reduction of operations in some hospitals, abortion is usually performed in the last ten days, thus going beyond the 80th day.

Remember, however, that your ASL has the duty of ensuring that you terminate your pregnancy within the time stated by the law (90) days or to refer you to the nearest hospital capable of doing so.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT FROM THE OPERATION?

In Italy, abortion is done through surgery, even if science has discovered new methods which

are less traumatic for the woman, such as medical abortion, which is already in use in other European countries and is now being tested in some Italian cities.

The most common method of abortion is vacuum aspiration, which consists of sucking out the contents of the uterus followed by an accurate cleaning of uterus walls.

The operation takes about 20 minutes. You can go back home between 2 and 8 hours after the operation or the day after, depending on the hospital.

Each hospital has its own rules governing use of anesthesia. Some perform the operation under

local anesthesia while others do so under total anesthesia.

Normally local anesthesia is advisable since it is considered to be less risky, but most women who have undergone abortion under local anesthesia have complained about “witnessing” the operation.

Generally, a check-up is done in the first two weeks after the operation which is also an occasion to set up a birth control therapy.

Usually the same hospital prescribes the woman a contraceptive pill to be taken on the same evening of the operation (which is to be considered the first day of menstrual period).

Family Planning Clinics

Family Planning Clinics are managed by the Local Health Offices and are free public service institutions mainly dedicated to a woman's health. Individuals, couples, youth and families can go to the Family Planning Clinics to seek help and support on social and health problems.

Family Planning Clinics have the duty of assisting for free all pregnant women, even those without a Permit of Stay, as well as their children until they become 18.

Access to Family Planning Clinics is accessible in an anonymous manner and for free; you don't require a prescription from your family doctor. Family Planning Clinics are fully equipped with staff: pediatrician, psychologist, etc. Some offer full medical assistance.

Of late there has been a substantial increase in the number of foreign citizens, mainly women, who go to the Family Planning Clinics, a place where, apart from receiving medical assistance, one can also seek advice from highly qualified and available staff.

Most of the people who go to these clinics seek help on how to terminate pregnancy, a very common problem among foreign women.

In these cases, the first duty of the Family Planning Clinics is to help the women overcome problems that are forcing them to consider terminating pregnancy.

The Family Planning Clinic staff will prepare a certificate certifying that the woman is pregnant, the stage of pregnancy and the woman's consent to abort. With this certificate the woman can proceed with the termination of pregnancy is any authorized hospital.

In order to reduce the problems of undesired pregnancies, the staff of Family Planning Clinics are committed to provide information on

how to prevent undesired pregnancies and on birth control methods. Such information is usually provided in brochures or leaflets written in different foreign languages.

There are also many requests from foreign women for Aids tests, pap-tests (the test for preventing and diagnosing uterus tumour). Also in these cases information is usually provided in brochures or leaflets written in different foreign languages. But probably the activities and initiatives that mainly draw women's attention, both Italian and foreign, especially the young ones, are those aimed at safeguarding maternity.

The Family Planning Clinics organize different courses ranging from prenatal ones to breastfeeding, as well as those special ones such as massaging the baby.

At the Family Planning Clinics a woman can be attended to by specialist doctors throughout her pregnancy until she gives birth. The baby is also attended to during its growth. In fact each Family Planning Clinic has a pediatrician, who in the case of foreign women without a Permit of Stay, substitutes the family doctor (which they could not have without a Medical Card) who carries out periodical checkups for their babies. Finally, Family planning clinics also perform vaccinations. The obligatory vaccinations (vaccination against diphtheria, tetanus, polio, Hepatitis B) are provided free of charge. The optional vaccinations are paid for. They include Pertussis Vaccine BP, Haemophilus influenzae type B vaccine, Measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine.

Whoever proves by showing an enrolment certificate to be taking her child to nursery school can have the child receive also the optional vaccinations for free.