

THE QUESTIONS ADOLESCENTS ASK MOST FREQUENTLY ABOUT

# Pregnancy

AND THEIR ANSWERS

Vol. 4



This booklet was developed together with adolescents  
by REPRO  gtz

Recent studies in Tanzania show that a large percentage of adolescents are sexually active. At the same time they lack basic knowledge about the functioning of their bodies and the risks involved in becoming sexually active at an early age. This ignorance often puts them at risk. Unwanted pregnancies, hazardous abortions, as well as sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS are a real threat to uninformed youth.

This booklet has been developed in response to this situation. It is meant to provide youths with information on the most crucial facts and to guide them in becoming responsible decision-makers for their own lives. Without sufficient knowledge adolescents cannot make informed choices, and experience has shown that informed youth often choose the safer option!

All of the questions in this booklet have been collected in recent years by counsellors and researchers working with adolescents. The youth originate from different regions of Tanzania and their ages range from 11 to 20 years. Please note that none of the questions are made up by adults!

The booklet has been developed by a multi-disciplinary team of social scientists, medical doctors and education specialists. The adolescents were involved in all stages of the process. With the publication of this booklet, we hope to contribute to the prevention of avoidable hardship for adolescents, caused by their ignorance.

November 2000

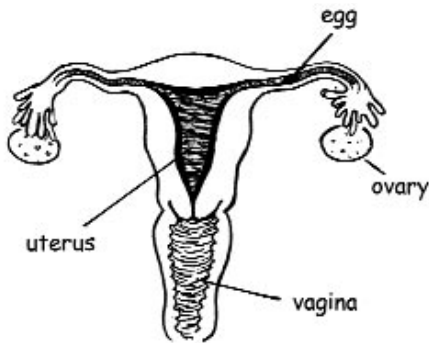
Regina Goergen, MSc, MPH, PHD  
Teamleader REPRO/GTZ

## Table of contents

1) How exactly is pregnancy caused? . . . . .	1
2) When exactly during the menstrual cycle can an egg be fertilised? . . . . .	3
3) Can I also get pregnant while having my period? . . . . .	4
4) Can I get pregnant before I had my first period ever? . . . . .	5
5) Can I get pregnant by having sex only once? . . . . .	6
6) Can a woman get pregnant while breast-feeding? . . . . .	7
7) Are there any dangers if a pregnant woman has sex with her partner? . . . . .	7
8) An egg is fertilised by one sperm only, but where do the others go? . . . . .	8
9) How is the sex of the child determined? . . . . .	9
10) Whose fault is it if a couple has only boys or only girls? . . . . .	10
11) How can I influence the sex of the child to be born? . . . . .	11
12) How come some women have twins? . . . . .	11
13) What are the first signs of pregnancy? . . . . .	13
14) Can a man realise that he made a woman pregnant the same day they had sex together? . . . . .	14
15) If I realise that I am pregnant, what should I do? . . . . .	14
16) What is the consequence of pregnancy at an early age? . . . . .	15
17) What is the consequence of pregnancy at an older age? . . . . .	17
18) What is the cause of the infertility of a man? . . . . .	19
19) What is the cause of the infertility of a woman? . . . . .	20
20) If a married couple does not have children, how can one know whether it is the fault of the man or of the woman? . . . . .	22
21) Can a woman be infertile, even if she has her periods? . . . . .	23
22) Can a man be infertile, even if he ejaculates? . . . . .	24
23) Is there anything I can do to avoid infertility? . . . . .	25
24) Is there any cure for infertility? . . . . .	26
25) Is there a safe way of having an abortion? . . . . .	26
26) Why do some people decide to have an abortion? . . . . .	28
27) Why do some eggs settle in the fallopian tubes instead of in the uterus? . . . . .	29
28) What are the causes of miscarriage and what actually happens? . . . . .	30
29) What are the reasons for a woman giving birth to a disabled child? . . . . .	31
30) How can a woman be sure to give birth to a healthy child? . . . . .	33

## How exactly is pregnancy caused?

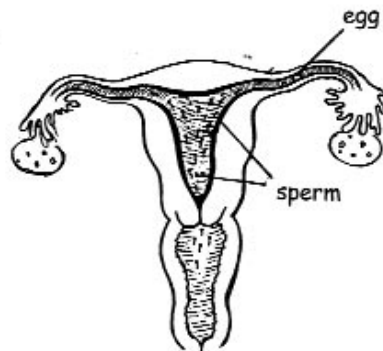
If you want to understand how pregnancy happens, you need to know about the menstrual cycle of a woman. After menstruating for the first time, a girl has her period once every month. Often it is every 28 days, although for some women it is less and for some it is more than 28 days.



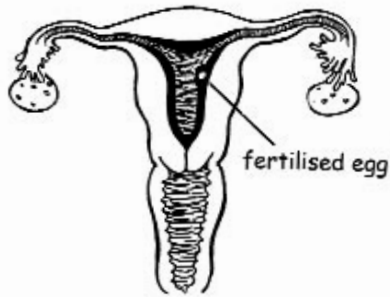
the egg moves through the fallopian tube

to grow in the ovary. Also, the lining of the uterus starts to build up, in order to receive a fertilised egg. Between the eleventh and

The first day of the period is counted as the first day of the menstrual cycle. After the bleeding stops, one egg starts



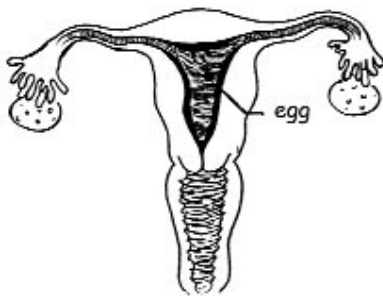
the egg is fertilised by a sperm in the fallopian tube



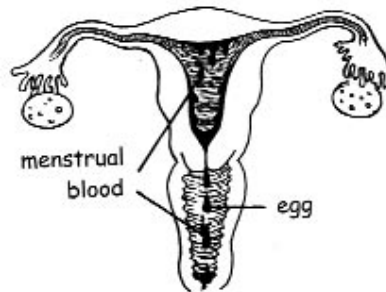
the fertilised egg settles in the lining of the uterus

fourteenth day, the egg is released from the ovary and starts to move through the fallopian tubes to the uterus. The woman gets pregnant, if the egg

is fertilised by a sperm in the fallopian tube. That is possible, if she has sex a few days before the egg is released or the same day the egg is released. If the egg is fertilised while moving towards the uterus, it will settle in the lining of the uterus. The baby is protected in the uterus while growing until the day it is born.



the egg reaches the uterus



the unfertilised egg leaves the uterus with menstrual blood



If the egg is not fertilised, it dies and together with the lining of the uterus it leaves the body of the woman as menstrual blood. That is, the woman has her period as usual and she will know that she is not pregnant.

When exactly during the menstrual cycle can an egg be fertilised?

A ripe egg is released 14 days before the onset of the next period. After being released either from the left or from the right ovary it moves through the fallopian tubes towards the uterus. If an egg unites with a sperm from the man while moving through the fallopian tubes, it can be fertilised. That is possible, if a woman has sex a few days before the egg is released or the same day the egg is released.

Since most young girls have very irregular periods, it is almost impossible for them to know the date of their next period. Therefore it is also difficult to know when there is an egg ready to be fertilised.

A girl's menstrual cycle can easily be affected by stress, sorrow, travelling or other changes in a girl's

life. Even if a girl has had regular periods for some time, they may suddenly become irregular. Most women and especially young girls cannot rely on counting days to avoid pregnancies, as they can never really know whether there is an egg ready to be fertilised or not. There are no "safe days" from pregnancy!

#### Can I also get pregnant while having my period?

For a woman to get pregnant a ripe egg has to unite with a sperm from a man. A ripe egg, which is not fertilised, dies and at the same time the lining, which developed in the uterus to receive the fertilised egg breaks down. The egg and the lining then move through the vagina together as menstrual blood.

Menstruation is a sign that the egg has not been fertilised and therefore died. Normally, there is no other egg ready to be fertilised at the time of the menstruation and in this case there is no danger of getting pregnant. However, sometimes mistakes happen in the menstrual cycle and there is a ripe egg ready to be fertilised, in spite of you having your period. Although it is not very common, it is possible to get pregnant even if you have your menstruation.

Can I get pregnant before I had my first period ever?

Yes, a girl can get pregnant before she had her first period ever, that is before ever having seen her menstrual blood. For sure you ask yourself why.

Before seeing the menstrual blood, an egg ripens in the ovaries of the girl and it moves from the ovaries towards the uterus. The menstruation is the sign that this ripe egg has not been fertilised and therefore it leaves the body through the vagina together with the lining of the uterus.





That means that, even if a girl has not yet had her first period ever, an egg may have started to ripen in her ovaries. This egg can be fertilised and the girl can get pregnant, even if she has never seen her menstrual blood in her life.

### Can I get pregnant by having sex only once?

Yes, a girl can get pregnant, if she has only had sex



once. It depends on the menstrual cycle. If there is a ripe egg released from the ovaries of the girl, ready to be fertilised and that same day the girl has sex with a man, she can get pregnant. This also applies, if she is having sex for the first time in her life.

### Can a woman get pregnant while breast-feeding?

In the first six months after giving birth to a child, a breast-feeding woman is protected from getting pregnant to a large extent. However, that requires that the woman breast-feeds the child intensively (the child suckles frequently and receives breast milk only) and that her menstrual cycle has not yet started again. If a woman starts to menstruate again or if the child receives any food other than breast milk, the woman can get pregnant again. She is therefore advised to use family planning in order to avoid having another child too soon.

### Are there any dangers if a pregnant woman has sex with her partner?

If none of the two partners has a sexually transmitted disease, there is no danger if a pregnant woman has sex with her partner. The uterus is closed completely and the baby is protected well, so that the sperm of the man can, under no circumstance, reach the baby.

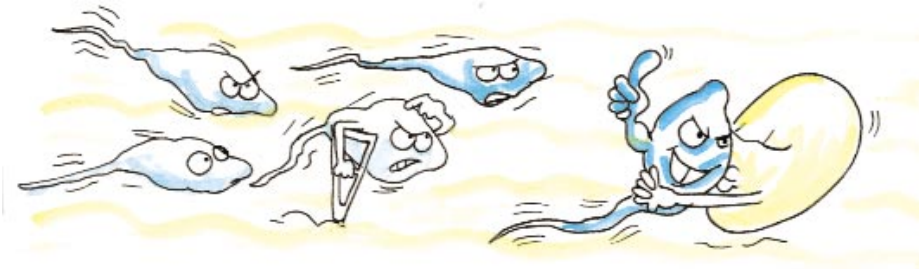
However, it is recommended that the two partners are careful and that the belly of the woman is not put under

too much pressure. Sometimes women do not feel like having sex, especially in the last part of the pregnancy. If a woman has such feelings, her partner is asked to respect it.

In addition, if the woman is infected with a sexually transmitted disease, having sex during her pregnancy can be very dangerous for her and for the unborn baby. If a couple has sex during pregnancy, they have to make sure that none of them has a sexually transmitted disease and/or they should use a condom for protection. In case of any doubts, they must consult a doctor for an examination.

An egg is fertilised by one sperm only, but where do the others go?

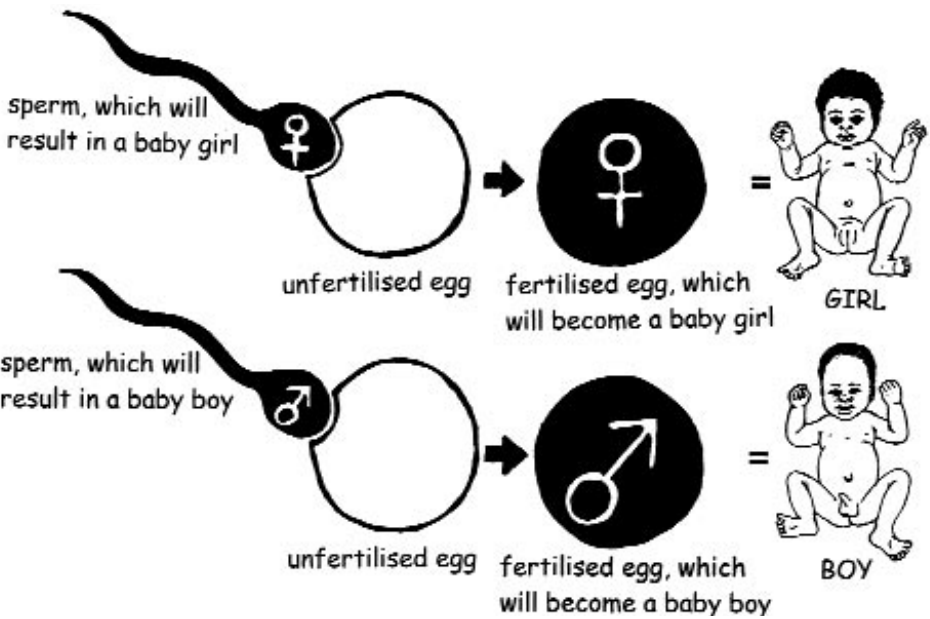
It is true that an egg is fertilised by one sperm only, which penetrates into the egg. The remaining sperm



dies and leaves the body through the vagina, because it has no further purpose. It is recommended to wash one's private parts after having sex.

How is the sex of the child determined?

Men produce two types of sperm. These are sperm, which will result in a baby boy and sperm, which will result in a baby girl. The sperm, which reaches the egg first, fertilises the egg. At that moment, the sex of the child is determined. About half of the babies born in a respective country are male and half of them are female.



Whose fault is it if a couple has only boys or only girls?

No one can be blamed if a couple has only boys or only girls, because the sex of the baby is determined by chance and there is no way human beings can influence it. As we saw above, the man has two types of sperm. One type leads to the creation of a baby girl and the other one to the creation of a baby boy. The man cannot influence which type of sperm will fertilise the egg. Therefore, although the sperm of the man determines the sex of the child, he cannot be blamed, because it is beyond his capacity to decide on the type of sperm to fertilise the egg.

A brother again!  
Let us ask our parents for a sister next time.....



### How can I influence the sex of the child to be born?

A baby starts to grow, if the egg of the woman is fertilised by sperm from the man. As we saw in the question above, the sex of the child depends on the type of sperm. Half of the sperm of a man results in a baby boy and half of the sperm results in a baby girl. However, men have no way of determining which sperm will fertilise the egg. Therefore, there is no way of influencing the sex of the child.

### How come some women have twins?

There are two types of twins, those who look the same and those who do not look the same. About 25% of all twins are twins who look the same. This means that they grew out of one egg, which split into two different clusters of cells, both of which later developed into a baby. Until now the scientists do not fully understand, why some eggs split up. As they are created from the same egg, twins of this type are always the same sex and they look very similar.





Twins who do not look like one another are caused by a simultaneous release of an egg in each ovary of the woman. Both eggs are fertilised, each one by a separate sperm from the man and two babies start to grow at the same time in the uterus. Except for growing in the same womb and being the same age, these twins are like any other children of these same parents. They can be of a different sex and have completely different characteristics to each other.

## What are the first signs of pregnancy?

One of the clearest signs is not menstruating. If a woman does not have her period as usual after having had sex with a man without using any contraceptives, it is often a sign of her being pregnant.

Another sign of pregnancy is swelling or tenderness of the breasts. Some women grow more pubic hair on the lower belly and for many the colour of the area around the nipples of the breasts becomes darker. Also, about half of all pregnant women feel sick and some vomit. Many women need to pass urine more frequently, some

feel tired and dizzy, especially in the first three months. Sometimes women have strong desires or dislikes for specific foods.

If a woman has any doubts, she should go for a urine test at the clinic in order to find out whether she is pregnant or not.



Can a man realise that he made a woman pregnant the same day they had sex together?

No, there is no way of knowing if a woman has become pregnant the same day as they had sex. It takes a certain time for the signs of pregnancy to be seen in the body.

If a woman wants to go to the clinic for a pregnancy test, she should first calculate on which day she would have expected to have her period. If she has not had her period after the usual duration of her menstrual cycle, she should go to the clinic. Pregnancy becomes visible in the urine the day the woman would normally have had her period. If a woman goes for a pregnancy test before that day, it is impossible to find out whether she is pregnant or not.

If I realise that I am pregnant, what should I do?

If you realise that you are pregnant, there are different things you should do. First of all, tell your partner and agree on what you should do next. Also, it is very important that you tell your parents. It might not be very easy to tell your parents, because most

likely they will not be very happy about it. But a good relationship with your parents can help you a lot while being pregnant and also afterwards.

From the health perspective it is most important to attend the antenatal clinic early, that is before the first three months of the pregnancy are over. The health workers can check the baby's and your health and they can also give you more advice. In addition, they can check for problems and solve them early. For your own and the baby's safety, make sure you follow the advice given by the health worker.

Some girls and women think about abortion, once they are faced with an unplanned pregnancy. However, abortion can be very hazardous to the health of a woman, especially if it is done by an untrained person and in unhygienic conditions.

What is the consequence of pregnancy  
at an early age?

The health specialists say that it is appropriate for women to start bearing children once they have reached



18 to 20 years of age. Before that age, the body of the girl has not yet sufficiently developed. The sexual organs are still small and the skin is soft. In addition, the pelvic bones are still too narrow for a baby to pass at childbirth.

Girls under the age of 18 are more likely to have problems, especially during delivery. The problems are high blood pressure, prolonged labour, obstructed labour, requiring a caesarean section, giving birth prematurely or giving birth to an underweight baby. The

strain put on the body during pregnancy and delivery are high and the body of a girl under the age of 18 has not developed enough to face such a challenge.

Besides health problems, there are other problems associated with early pregnancy. Often the girl and her boyfriend still go to school, the girl will be expelled from school and she may even be excluded from society. Often the young people have neither sufficient income to look after a child, nor a place to stay. Frequently, the boys are not ready to take on the responsibility of being a father. For all these reasons, it is better to wait with childbearing until the girl has at least reached 20 years of age.

What is the consequence of pregnancy at an older age?

The probability of having health problems during pregnancy and delivery is higher for women of 35 or even 40 years of age, when compared to women between aged 20 to 35.

There may be even more problems, if the woman has already given birth to many children. After having given





birth to five or more children, the muscles of the uterus are worn out. This often leads to severe bleeding, prolonged labour and rupture of the uterus. Other inconveniences are a bad position of the child in the womb and very big babies. Older women, who have had a large number of children, one after the other have a higher probability of dying during pregnancy and delivery.

## What is the cause of the infertility of a man?

Infertility means that the man is incapable of making a woman pregnant. There are many things, which can cause infertility.

Many infertile men are born infertile and not much can be done about it. In these cases, infertility is caused by defects of the sexual organs of the man. Such defects are, for example, not being able to produce sperm or insufficient production of sperm. In addition, sexual parts can be impaired by diseases and the seminal canals can be blocked as a consequence of having had a sexually transmitted disease, such as gonorrhoea or syphilis. Yet another reason for infertility is the inability to have erections, which can be caused by sexually transmitted diseases, as well as by emotional and psychological distress. Many of those conditions cannot be cured and they cause the man to be permanently infertile.

However, there are also other, more temporary reasons for infertility, such as illness, excessive drinking, drug

I think we went too late  
to cure the sexually transmitted  
disease we had...



abuse, an unhealthy diet, sorrow and grief. Some of these conditions can be changed, as for example the use of drugs or emotional distress and the man will regain his usual capability of making a woman pregnant.

**What is the cause of the infertility of a woman?**

Infertility means that a woman cannot get pregnant. As for men, there are many reasons for women's infertility.

In order for a woman to get pregnant, quite a few things have to happen. The egg has to ripen and it has to move through the fallopian tubes where it can be fertilised. Also, the fertilised egg has to reach the uterus and the lining of the uterus has to be ready to receive the egg. If for any reason one of these steps does not take place, a woman can not get pregnant. Not producing any eggs is often because of emotional or psychological distress, while having blocked fallopian tubes is often caused by sexually transmitted diseases. Some women are infertile as a consequence of an attempt at induced abortion, which led to complications and permanent damage of her internal sexual organs. Unfortunately, many of those conditions cannot be cured and women are permanently infertile.

There are also temporary reasons for infertility. Among those are illness, excessive drinking, drug abuse, a scanty diet, as well as sorrow and grief. Most of those conditions can be cured, as for example drug abuse or emotional distress. Once they are cured, the woman will be able to get pregnant.

If a married couple does not have children, how can one know whether it is the fault of the man or of the woman?

On average, it takes about one year for a woman to get pregnant, if a man and a woman regularly have sex without using any contraceptives. Some couples take a longer and others a shorter time.

If the woman is not pregnant after one or one and a half years, people start to be worried and to think about possible causes. Because there are many possible causes, it is best if a doctor examines both the man and



the woman. The doctor may then find out whether the problem lies with the woman, the man or both of them. Unless a couple consults a doctor, they cannot know for sure which of the two has problems.

Once the root of the problem is found, the doctor can advise the couple about the possibility of curing them and help them to have a child.

Can a woman be infertile, even if she has her periods?

Yes, even a woman who has her periods regularly can be infertile, as much as a woman who does not have her periods regularly can be fertile.

There is a certain connection between menstruation and the capability of getting pregnant. Having regular periods is a sign that the woman most probably has regular ovulation. However, there is no certainty that her fallopian tubes properly transport the egg from the ovary to the uterus. Therefore, even a woman who has regular periods can be infertile.

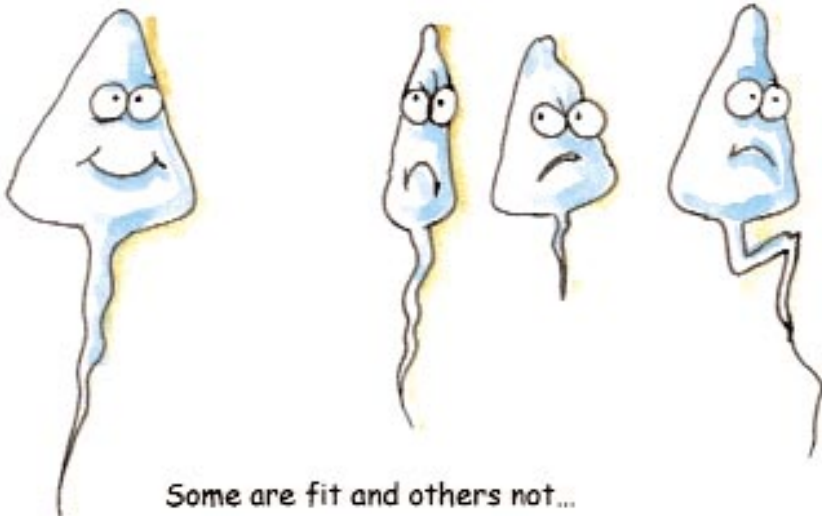


In order for a woman to be sure, whether she is infertile or not, she must consult a doctor for an examination.

Can a man be infertile, even if he ejaculates?

Yes, a man who can ejaculate without problems can still be infertile. Being able to make a woman pregnant requires that the man's penis can erect, that the man can ejaculate and that there is strong and healthy sperm to fertilise the egg.

Therefore, even if the man ejaculates, it may be that there are only a few sperm in the seminal fluid or that



these sperm are not healthy or strong enough. If this is the case, the man is infertile. However, only a doctor can conclude with certainty whether a man is fertile or infertile.

**Is there anything I can do to avoid infertility?**

A major reason for infertility is sexually transmitted diseases. You can protect yourself from infertility, by avoiding being infected with a sexually transmitted disease. Sexually transmitted diseases can be prevented by abstaining from sex or by protecting yourself with a



Did you know that  
I help to avoid  
infertility?

condom every time you have sex. There are other reasons for infertility, some of which you can influence and some of which have been in your body since you are born.

### Is there any cure for infertility?

There is no general answer for that question, because cures for infertility depend largely on its cause. There are causes of infertility, which can be cured, but often it is difficult or it is not possible at all to cure the respective woman or man.

First of all, a doctor has to examine the couple and conclude what causes the infertility. Then he can advise the couple about the possibility of being cured. Sometimes it is easy to find a cure, but some of the causes are serious and it is very difficult or even impossible to solve them.

### Is there a safe way of having an abortion?

The danger of having problems depends on the circumstances under which the abortion is conducted. If it is in a hospital under the care of trained health staff and if the environment and all the instruments are clean, there is a high probability of having a safe abortion. However, even in a safe environment problems can arise.



It is most important to remember that it is very dangerous to let an untrained person perform the abortion or to try doing it oneself. Women who try to perform the abortion themselves are very likely to get an infection of their sexual organs and some of them even injure the uterus. Many problems related to abortion are very serious, like for example an injured uterus, an untreated infection of the sexual organs, severe bleeding, infertility or even the death of the woman.

Therefore it is better and safer to prevent abortions. Abortions can be prevented by avoiding unplanned pregnancies, either by not having sex or by using family planning methods.

### Why do some people decide to have an abortion?

Although abortions are illegal in many African countries, some people decide to have an abortion, because their pregnancy was not planned. For example a young girl who still goes to school, or a woman who already has many children or who is quite old. Other women decide to have an abortion, because their pregnancy is caused by forced sex or rape, or if the father of the child refuses



to accept the responsibility for fatherhood. These are a few reasons to decide on an abortion, but every woman has her own specific reasons to decide on an abortion.

In countries where abortions are illegal, abortion services are not easily accessible and many women decide to try to do it themselves or with the assistance of an untrained person. As we said above, this can be very dangerous for the health of the woman.

Why do some eggs settle in the fallopian tubes instead of in the uterus?

The major cause for eggs settling in the fallopian tubes, are infections, which result in the blockage of those passages. These infections are often caused by sexually transmitted diseases and hinder the egg from passing to the uterus. If a woman has suffered from a sexually transmitted disease, the probability of eggs settling in the fallopian tubes is increased.

If you think you are pregnant or if you have pains in the lower belly, you are strongly advised to go to the clinic for an examination.

If the egg settles in the fallopian tubes, the thin walls of the tubes fail to expand enough to give space to the growing baby. The tubes will burst and cause bleeding. In that case the woman has to go to the hospital immediately for surgery and eventually to be given blood.

What are the causes of miscarriage and what actually happens?

About 10% to 20% of all pregnancies are miscarriages and many miscarriages happen in the first 12 weeks of the pregnancy. The main reasons for miscarriages are



Nine months later

problems with or damage to the fertilised egg. If such an egg continued to grow, the result would be a mentally or physically disabled child. Therefore, a miscarriage can be a natural way of the body of solving such problems.

Additionally, miscarriages can happen if the woman falls sick with diseases like malaria or syphilis, if she falls badly or if she has any problems with her sexual organs. The signs of miscarriage are bleeding from the vagina and strong pains in the abdomen.

What are the reasons for a woman giving birth to a disabled child?

There are different types of disability and there are also different reasons for disability. Disability of the child can be caused at three different stages, namely during conception, during pregnancy and at delivery.

For a baby to be conceived, many processes have to happen at the right time. The process of unification



between a ripe egg and a sperm is something complicated and mistakes can happen. Such mistakes are not preventable and are largely due to bad luck.

One major reason for disability is if a woman falls seriously sick during pregnancy. For example, if a woman has malaria and she has to take strong medicine, either the disease itself or the use of drugs can harm the baby who is growing in the uterus. Malaria is one of the major reasons for miscarriage and the unborn baby being disabled. Women are strongly advised to be very careful in order not to be infected with malaria during pregnancy. Another reason for disability is drug abuse, excessive drinking or smoking during pregnancy. These things harm the human body, especially unborn babies.

In some cases, disability of the child is caused during delivery. Therefore it is most important that you make sure you are attended to by a skilled birth attendant, who is aware of dangers and can react accordingly.

How can a woman be sure to give birth  
to a healthy child?

Even if a woman does all she can to make sure the child is healthy, there is a certain chance of giving birth to an unhealthy child. This is due to bad luck and there is no way it can be influenced. However, there are certain things, which contribute to increasing the probability of having a healthy child.

One of these is to take good care of a pregnant woman's health. A pregnant woman needs a balanced diet, she



should not do heavy work, she should relax and sleep enough, she should not drink alcohol and she should attend ante-natal care in order to check on her health and the development of the child. It is very important for pregnant women to avoid being infected with malaria, since this is a major danger for the unborn child. For delivery, she should go to the hospital and trained health staff should assist her in giving birth. If she does so, the probability of giving birth to a healthy child is very high.

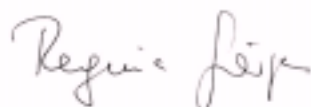
### Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank all adolescents involved in the development of these booklets for their valuable contribution. Among those are all adolescents who contributed by raising their questions, as well as a group of dynamic peer educators and a group of male and female youngsters in Temeke, Dar es Salaam.

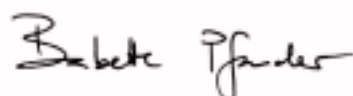
Many thanks also go to Mr. Walter Mbunda, as well as Mr. Elisha Kapinga and Mr. Simon Mbele (UMATI) for their facilitation.

The same gratitude is owed to Ms. Rehema Mwateba and Ms. Akwillina Mlay for their expertise in adolescent reproductive health, Dr. Clemens Roll and Dr. Suzanne Mouton for medical advise and to Ms. Lut Labeeuw (education specialist). We are thankful to Ms. Margret and Mr. Simon Kilembe for the translation, as well as Dr. Zubeida Tumbo-Masabo (Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Kiswahili Research) and Ms. Karen Walker for proofreading.


Many thanks also go to the cartoonist Mr. David Chikoko and the photographer Mr. Ulrich Doering for their valuable contribution towards the illustration of the booklets. In addition, we thank Femina-HIP Magazine/ Petra Sutula, Population Services International (PSI) Tanzania and Family Care International (FCI) for the provision of illustrations.



Regina Goergen,  
Teamleader REPRO/GTZ




Babette Pfander,  
Consultant



This booklet is part of a series of six booklets with the following titles:

1. **Growing Up**
2. **Male-Female Relationships**
3. **Sexual Relationships**
4. **Pregnancy**
5. **Healthy Relationships**
6. **HIV/AIDS and the New Generation**

If you are interested in any of the booklets,

feel free to contact: REPRO 

P.O. Box 65350

Dar es Salaam

Tel.: ++255 22 215 1365

Fax: ++255 22 215 1337

e-mail: [repro-gtz@africaonline.co.tz](mailto:repro-gtz@africaonline.co.tz)