

‘The Future of Telehealth is Here: Having an Abortion at Home’

Abortion access is expanding for all people who seek safe and affordable abortion to now be offered care from the privacy of their own homes.

By Francesca Jensen

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After 15 years of marriage and three kids, Shauna's husband walked out on her. Six months later, she met another man. But, with this new fiery relationship came abuse and control. Soon Shauna was in despair.

"It started that he loved me, desired me…then he flipped and became very controlling," said Shauna, who asked that her last name be withheld to protect her privacy. He put spyware on her phone and tracking devices in her truck. Her life became dictated by his irrationality and manipulation. Shauna became pregnant with his child in 2020 and after nine months, the birth of their child only made the abuse worse. Then three months after their first baby's birth, she found out she was pregnant again.

Sitting in her bathroom, alone, Shauna crumbled, and the four walls surrounding her felt suffocating. "In this time, I lost all sense of pride," she recalled. Overwhelm and fear consumed her. "I couldn't have this baby," she said.

"I've been a Christian my whole life. To me, pro-life means pro-choice," explained Shauna, a 39-year-old woman from California. "I gave my child to Jesus in sacrifice for my living children. Having an abortion is not for everyone, but it was for me, it saved my family's life." She explained how the medically induced abortion happened.

Going to the clinic wasn't an option for Shauna, so she used the internet and the postal service. Every move she made was monitored by her boyfriend. "There was no way of knowing what would happen if he found out I was getting an abortion," she explained. "I thought of ways to get an abortion. I saw online that I was able to get abortion pills delivered, through an online service called Plan C. This resource was my only hope." Plan C offers at-home abortion pill, also known as a "medical abortion" through an online service.

Many women are unable to go to a clinic due to abusive situations like Shauna. Other women may be in a rural area and have difficulty accessing the nearest abortion clinic. And in urban areas clinics can be very busy and backed up. Now there is remote access, and both the pandemic and the toughening of anti-abortion laws in some states mean that more and more women are taking advantage of this option.

When people think about where to go for abortions, they may consider Planned Parenthood or research the internet. Increasingly after the overturn of Roe v. Wade in June of 2022, protestors may circulate at abortion clinics, using threats of violence, harassment, and intimidation to skew the decisions of these women. Furthermore, crisis pregnancy centers have popped up on the internet pretending to be real health centers but turn out to be lured by groups who then seek to turn women away from abortions.



Crisis pregnancy centers — also called CPCs or "fake clinics" — are clinics that look like real health centers, but they are run by anti-abortion activists who have a shady, harmful agenda: to scare, shame, or pressure women out of getting an abortion, often giving misinformation about abortion, birth control, and sexual health.

According to Planned Parenthood, these centers are listed online or on map apps as a pregnancy resource center, pregnancy help center, pregnancy care center, women's resource center, or abortion alternatives, yet their sole purpose is to skew a woman's decision away from an abortion.

"Having a discreet medication abortion saved my family's life," Shauna said. "I aborted my child because I loved him or her more than myself. Now, that child will never know the pain, depression, rape, abuse, or hunger. In God's arms that child will go."

Medical abortions have been available at clinics in the United States since 2000. Yet, after the nationwide lockdown due to Covid-19 in 2020, when access to abortion care in person became restricted, requests went up for abortion pills to be mailed. Guttmacher's latest available figures regarding abortion statistics are from 2020, when it says there were 930,160 abortions nationwide, up from 916,460 in 2019. With Telehealth on the rise, companies such as Plan C Pills, have moved to the forefront in abortion care. Similar to Plan C Pills, Choix Health had jumped on the bandwagon in early 2019, starting the first mail order abortion pill service in California that then launched its services publicly in 2020.

Choix is a telehealth platform specializing in abortion care from the comfort of your own home. Choix, alongside Plan C Pills, Hey Jane, and a few other online abortion care services, provides women with the option to get a safe and affordable at-home abortion. All patients have to do is contact Choix for a telehealth appointment, follow up with an ultrasound, and then they have the option to be guided through the rest of the process by a physician via virtual appointments.



Cindy Adam, FNP – Founder, chief executive officer

As founders Lauren Dubey and Cindy Adam were building the Choix online platform, there was a federal court ruling in 2020 saying abortion care could be dispensed through telehealth. Adam said the challenging part for the fledgling company "was that Choix didn't know if this ruling would be long term or not."Then, in December 2021, the federal courts decided to legalize the mailing of mifepristone, the pill used for at-home abortions, to inquiring patients.

Founders Cindy Adam and Lauren Dubey were colleagues at UC San Francisco, before founding this company. Adam worked researching fertility and women's health doing rotations at Planned Parenthood. Dubey also worked at Planned Parenthood as a Nurse Practitioner.

Dubey, a registered nurse practitioner, says the at-home pills are convenient. "Medically speaking, Choix is the same level of care, it's just quicker to go. You also don't need an appointment and because so many people are trying to go to Planned Parenthood it can be timelier," she said.



Lauren Dubey, NP - Founder, chief nursing officer

Choix is a virtual clinic. You can text in live time, so you are getting a very similar level of care to what you would get in a clinic, in person. It is as close as it could be to an in-person experience, Dubey says, in that you are getting the same type of abortion care, follow-ups, medications –but you get all of that without leaving your home. Going into the clinic can be a completely different experience. Despite potential clinic closures, or protests, there also isn't 24-hour care. Being able to reach out to physicians and having staff on hand at all times is an important part of the at-home abortion experience, that one may not get in person.

"Anti-abortion people find us by sending secret shoppers, people messaging us, but patients are fully protected which is a reason people use us," Adam said. Choix began in California, yet it has now expanded its services to Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Maine, and Virginia. Patients can stay anonymous or talk one-on-one with the team to get support throughout their abortion journey.

Choix is on the other end of the phone line with its patients throughout the whole process. Although Shauna mentions not using the services beyond the abortion pills themselves, she felt that at any time she could talk to someone on the team.

Although Shauna was likely only six weeks along when she found out she was pregnant, both Choix and Plan C Pills offer abortion care up to ten weeks after the first day of one's last menstrual period. To use Plan C Pills, she filled out the dates of both her last period and her positive pregnancy test, sent in a copy of her driver's license, and paid a consult fee of $20.

During this time “I was able to get away,” from her abusive boyfriend, said Shauna. After filing a restraining order and receiving guidance from Plan C and partners throughout the process, Shauna said she could relax. .

“The teenagers needed rides everywhere, the baby cried all the time, I’m working, and cooking dinner, but I don’t stare at my feet, I don’t sit in my car and not wanting to go inside my own home,” she said. “I got away. This abortion allowed me to choose me, so my kids could have the mother they need.”

Shauna was 37, yet medical abortion is legal for pregnant people aged 16 and older in California. It is for anyone looking to safely end a pregnancy in the first 10 weeks from the comfort of home. The Choix team says medical abortions are “completely safe and Choix provides its clients with the necessary information and resources.” The process is guided by a medical professional from beginning to end.

More research from Guttmacher notes that since the pandemic, roughly half of all abortions are now through medication in general. The abortion medication regimen contains two medications needed for the abortion process: Mifepristone and Misoprostol. The first pill a client will take is Mifepristone, which blocks pregnancy hormones and stops the pregnancy from continuing. Misoprostol is the second medication in the process, taken either right after the first medication, or up to two days later depending how far along the patient is.

Misoprostol causes cramping and bleeding, and makes the body pass/expel the pregnancy. The overall process is different for everyone but can be similar to a heavy period, with cramping and bleeding. The heaviest bleeding will be for 24 hours after misoprostol, and there may be continued moderate to light bleeding for a few days, or even spotting for a few weeks. This is completely normal and Choix follows up with its patients to reassure them of what to expect.

Ultimately, the abortion pill ends a pregnancy — so it is used when a person is already pregnant. This is not to be confused with Plan B, or emergency contraception. Emergency contraception can stop pregnancy from happening in the first place — so someone would use it soon after sex but before they are actually pregnant. They also only have 72 hours to use plan B effectively.

Those who work with pill-induced abortions through telehealth claim there is is much misinformation circulating which makes it hard for people to trust what they see online. “People often think this website can be too good to be true,” Dubey explained. There are some common doubts and misconceptions about non-surgical abortions due to this misinformation. But, Choix and Plan C are members of the National Abortion Federation, are certified to prescribe online,

have bios about all the providers, lots of FAQs ─ and offer information about in-person abortion care resources.

Choix has data from 150 patients that it says shows efficacy, and safety rates on par with in-person abortion clinics. For Shauna, the most significant part of care was getting what she needed, but without judgment from others. She didn't have to fear protestors in the same way she would at a physical clinic.

"Anti-abortion people find us by sending secret shoppers, people messaging us, but patients are fully protected which is a reason people use us," Adam said. Choix began in California, yet it has now expanded its services to Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Maine, and Virginia. Patients can stay anonymous or talk one-on-one with the team to get support throughout their abortion journey.

Unfortunately, there are still 13 states where abortion is completely banned. It can be extremely difficult for women in these states to travel for legal care. They need to call and schedule an appointment. "It is not illegal for someone to go to another state and get an abortion" Adam said. "You can't say because you are a resident of one place and get denied care in a place where it is legal," says Adam. This is like saying you cannot buy weed in Nevada because you are from Kentucky.

Overall, the overturning of Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in 1973 has changed availability for women, in many states, to obtain reproductive health care. Laws formally known as Targeted Restrictions Against Abortion Providers, require admitting privileges and a 24-hour waiting period, once women enter clinics and have the ultrasound. Laws vary by state, but states such as Arizona, Utah, and Wyoming are among the 23 states with theseTRAP laws. The Center For Reproductive Rights provides a map assigning each state into one of five categories regarding the current bans and restrictions: expanded access, protected, not protected, hostile, and illegal.

Some of the most devastating years for abortion care were 2020 and 2021. "Black, brown, and indigenous people in the United States have always seen disproportionately poorer healthcare," explains Adam. Mark Stagen, an adjunct Professor at the University of Southern California who studies the healthcare system describes how "the real issue goes back into history of the black and brown communities in this country." Stagen explains how "healthcare costs disproportionately affect uninsured adults, and those with lower incomes are not going to pay for health insurance because they think they can stay clear of medical care, until something actually happens."

Mark Stagen - Founder & CEO of Emerald Health Services and Professor at USC



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In order to help lower-income people, Choix offers a sliding scale, where the average cost is $289 and includes everything you need from medications, to clinician care, and standard shipping. Because they are committed to making abortion care accessible for all, they also offer a lower price $175 for people who need financial assistance. However, there are some patients willing to pay more on this scale, ultimately helping support people who need care and cannot afford the full cost. In this way, Choix collectively expands access to abortion care and patients support each other.

Most recently, Choix has offered advance provision pills. Advance provision is a way for people to get abortion pills ahead of time in case they need them in the future. Choix joined colleges at Aid Access, another online abortion platform, in this decision. When Dobb's v. Jackson came down on the constitutional right of abortion and overturned Roe v. Wade earlier this year, Adam said “Choix wanted to do something that felt proactive and was offensive.”

Ultimately, for Shauna, and many women like her, the abortion by mail changed her life. And it was not in conflict with her Christian convictions. She wants to give her thanks to Jesus, “Me and my family, my four kids are free at last and at peace now.”