Induced abortion and psychosexuality
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Authors' objectives
To determine the impact of induced abortion on sexuality and couple relationships.

Searching
The following sources were searched: MEDLINE from 1966 to 1999; the Cochrane Library (Cochrane Controlled Trials Register); LILACS from 1982 to 1999; HealthSTAR from 1992 to 1999; and ADOLEC and Sociofile from 1963 to 1999. The keywords used were 'induced abortion', 'termination of pregnancy', 'sexuality', 'sexual dysfunction', 'libido', 'anorgasmia', 'couple' and 'relationship'. The reference lists of relevant papers were also examined. Both published and unpublished data were eligible for inclusion.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
The inclusion criteria were not defined in terms of the study design. The included studies comprised a prospective case-control study with 1-year follow-up, a prospective study with a matched control group, and cross-sectional studies.

Specific interventions included in the review
Studies examining induced pregnancy termination were eligible.

Participants included in the review
Women who have had an induced abortion were eligible. Studies included women with the following characteristics: women opting for termination; women with two or more previous terminations, matched with women attending the same hospital for delivery; women who were in a stable relationship referred by a private gynaecologist, matched with women from the same private practice on oral contraceptives; and women aged 16 to 45 years who had a first-trimester termination.

Outcomes assessed in the review
Studies that evaluated sexuality using quantitative or qualitative measures were eligible. The included studies assessed the following outcomes: frequency of sexual intercourse; sexual satisfaction; failed contraception; sexual desire; orgasmic function; quality of partnership; separation; and dyspareunia. The outcomes were measured using questionnaires and/or interviews by physicians.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors do not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many of the reviewers performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
Validity was not formally assessed, although aspects relating to validity were mentioned in the text.

Data extraction
The authors do not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many of the reviewers performed the data extraction.

Information tabulated in the review included: author and year of publication; characteristics of the participants; and outcomes and methods used to assess outcomes.
Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The studies were combined in a narrative review.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences between the studies were discussed in the text of the review.

Results of the review
Four studies were included. There was one prospective study with a matched control group (100 women), one prospective case-control study (at least 184 women), and two cross-sectional studies (1,900 and 85 women, respectively).

There were several methodological problems with the primary studies: retrospective studies with no information on the temporal relationship between abortion and study were included; there was a lack of baseline data from before the termination; the gestational age at the time of termination was rarely reported; some studies lacked a control group; and there were differences at baseline between the comparison groups in the controlled studies.

Most of the studies were conducted 10 to 20 years ago and were in settings where women had access to non-restrictive legal abortion.

The prospective case-control study (at least 184 women) compared women undergoing pregnancy termination and women visiting the same practitioners for oral contraception. The women were questioned at baseline and after 1-year follow-up. Similar changes over time in terms of frequency of coitus (decrease reported by 18% of the study group), sexual satisfaction (decrease reported by 5.4% of the study group) and separation rates (22% and 17%), were found in both groups. The study group reported a lower level of partnership quality at enrolment.

The observational studies reported sexual dysfunction in up to 30% of women after the termination. Women undergoing abortion reported significantly more conflicts in their relationships, and separation was reported in approximately 25% of the couples.

One observational study compared 50 women with at least two prior induced abortions, with 50 women with no prior terminations who continued their pregnancy to term. The study found significantly reduced sexual desire (38% versus 10%) and orgasm rates (20% versus 44%) in women who had repeat terminations, compared with the control group.

One cross-sectional study interviewed 85 women who had a first-trimester termination 3 to 6 months previously. The study found that 29.4% of the respondents reported reduced sexual desire, 18.8% reported orgasmic problems, and 26% of the couples were separated. In the third observational study, approximately 30% of the 1,900 women who had previously undergone an abortion reported less frequent orgasm after the abortion, compared with before.

Authors’ conclusions
There were limited data reporting on sexuality after abortion. Some studies have shown sexual dysfunction after the intervention. Psychological factors may have played a part in failed contraception.

CRD commentary
The aims of the review were stated, and the inclusion criteria were defined in terms of the intervention and outcomes. Relevant sources were searched, and published and unpublished data were eligible for inclusion. However, the methods used to select the studies were not described. Validity was not formally assessed, although some aspects of validity were commented upon in the text of the review. Relevant data were extracted and presented in tabular format, but the methods used to extract the data were not described. A narrative review was appropriate given the small number of identified studies of varying design. As the authors state, the available data were very limited.

The evidence presented supports the authors’ conclusions.
Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors did not state any implications for practice.

Research: The authors state that there is need for methodologically sound research into the impact of induced abortion on sexuality.

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Record Status
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.