

Waiting to start abortion: A qualitative exploration of narratives of waiting shared in a Reddit community for abortion post-*Dobbs* leak

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Background

Obtaining an abortion in a timely manner is a critical component of access and quality in reproductive healthcare [1], but time-focused restrictions on abortion are common [2]. These restrictions delay access to abortion care by increasing appointment wait time, adding burdens on clinics, and increasing the time required to organize logistics [3-5]. Delayed access to abortion care creates mental health burdens, limits care options, increases costs, and can prevent abortion access [3-6].



Before the *Dobbs* decision in June of 2022,* many people waited days, if not weeks, for abortion care [5,7]. After *Dobbs*, obstacles to access increased, and delays in obtaining abortion care are now longer and more widespread around the country. Understanding the experience of people waiting for an abortion is an important and understudied area of research [8,9].

People use Reddit to discuss a variety of reproductive health concerns, including abortion. The r/abortion subreddit has over 45,000 members, and is moderated to create a safe environment with quality information for members.** Our research team used data from r/abortion posted over the course of 2022 to examine the experiences of people waiting to start abortion care in light of policy restrictions resulting from the *Dobbs* decision.

Methods


Using data from an abortion subreddit (r/abortion), we analyzed Reddit posts where users described waiting after they had begun the process of obtaining an abortion, either by scheduling an in-clinic appointment or ordering abortion medication(s) online. Our analysis explored: **1) wait time length, 2) factors contributing to waiting, and 3) described impacts of waiting.** Our 5-person team used a qualitative thematic approach*** to analyze 549 posts shared on r/abortion following the *Dobbs* leak in 2022.

Key Findings


Among posts to r/abortion that described waiting to start an abortion (n=80), wait times ranged from 1 day to more than 1 month. Lack of appointment availability and waiting for mailed medications were commonly described as causing delays.

| | Procedural abortion | Medication abortion |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Wait time length | 1 day to >1 month | 1 day to >3 weeks |
| Common reasons for waiting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of appointment availability Mandatory waiting periods and multiple appointments Unusual pregnancy experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waiting for pills to arrive Lack of appointment availability Mandatory waiting periods and multiple appointments Challenges with online information and ordering systems Delayed pregnancy confirmation |

While waiting, people shared challenges with pregnancy symptoms and feelings of anxiety, fear, isolation, and uncertainty. Many people described needing additional support during this stressful and isolating period.

 I feel so sad, but not about getting an abortion but because this entire process has been so difficult. I probably won't tell anyone about this and it feels like a lot to handle on my own. I feel anxious and depressed and know it will probably get worse in the days leading up to my appointment. Any kind words would be appreciated. *(composite quote, procedural abortion)*



 I found out I was pregnant last weekend and am trying to order AidAccess but am confused about where I am in the process. Was I supposed to get an email? When is the latest I can take the pills? Can someone reassure me, I'm so nervous they'll get here too late and I won't be able to use them. I tried booking through Planned Parenthood but the soonest they can see me is in three weeks. *(composite quote, medication abortion)*

Conclusions and Opportunities

The common challenges described while waiting for abortion care—difficult pregnancy symptoms, lack of information, isolation, anxiety, and fear—highlight the negative influences of abortion restrictions and stigma on access to support from health care providers, family, friends, and partners.

- **Continued efforts are needed to continue to describe and combat the impacts of restrictions and stigma, working through research, advocacy, services, and policy.**

Existing resources for pregnant people, often to support people planning to continue their pregnancies or having an abortion, are not meeting the needs of people waiting for abortion care, as shown by posts on r/abortion.

- **New and different resources are needed to support people waiting for abortion care, focused on managing pregnancy symptoms, understanding what to expect during an abortion, and navigating anxiety and isolation while waiting.**

For more information about this research, contact the Wallace Center for MCAH Research (wallacecenter@berkeley.edu)

Endnotes:

*The *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision from the Supreme Court (June 24, 2022) overturned national protections for abortion and returned the decision to restrict or protect abortion to individual states.

***The "r/abortion" subreddit offers "support and advice to people who are seeking or have had an abortion" and is voluntarily moderated by individuals who seek to create a safe environment with quality information for members. .

***Qualitative analysis was done using a hybrid inductive and deductive thematic coding approach, accounting for research while allowing for the emergence of new and salient codes.

Brief created by Yucca Phun and Elizabeth Pleasants

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