

Sterilization in the childfree population: an exploratory study

Ashley B. Parker, MS, Amy G. Bryant, MD, MSCR, Jessica E. Morse, MD, MPH
University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, NC

Background

- Female sterilization is the most common method of contraception in the US¹
- Between 1909-1979, there were 60,000 forcible sterilizations in government-organized programs²
- In the 1970s, ob-gyns followed a “120 rule” = age multiplied by parity = 120 before sterilization was appropriate (ie. 30 yo x 4 children = 120)²
- Regret in women who had a tubal sterilization from 1978-1987 was lowest among women who had **no previous births** (30 or younger: 6.3%; >30yo: 5.4%) (CREST)³
- There is a large community of people who are childfree by choice and would likely not regret sterilization
- Reddit (r/childfree) has 1.5 million members worldwide⁴
- Users report multiple barriers to obtaining a sterilization, including physician refusal due to age or perceived risk of regret⁴
- Objectives:**
 - To describe the childfree population seeking sterilization
 - To identify reasons childfree people seek sterilization
 - To identify barriers to receiving surgical sterilization
 - To characterize the incidence of regret in the sterilized childfree population

Methods

- REDCap survey
- Advertised on Reddit, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter
- Participants were ages 18 or older, live in the US, have no biological children, and have sought or are seeking surgical sterilization

“I hope you can use this info to help guide training for doctors that childfree by choice isn't something people just wake up and decide to be. It's a commitment we've thoroughly explored emotionally and mentally.”

“I believe getting sterilized has given me a new sense of freedom and will be better for my health and future.”

“Surgical sterilization was the best choice I have ever made for myself and my family.”

“It took me 10 years to find a physician willing to sterilize me.”

“I live in Tennessee, one of many states with an abortion ban trigger law. The Supreme Court is what motivated me to get a bisalp. I feel relieved I was able to find an awesome progressive GYN who listened to my fears about abortion rights and immediately approved me for surgery.”

“I love this research! I do want to say I'm mad that it was near immediate to be approved because of gender stuff, but I couldn't get approved as a young woman. I hope some of this research can help change that.”

“My only regret was not getting sterilized when I was younger.”

Childfree individuals have a variety of reasons for seeking sterilization and may be at a lower risk of regret than parous people who are sterilized

Results

- 403 participants completed the survey:
 - 153 (38%) were sterilized
 - 44 (11%) were approved for a procedure
 - 32 (8%) had been unable to find a doctor to do the procedure
 - 83 (21%) were seeking a doctor
 - 91 (22%) had not yet sought a doctor
- Participants were:
 - Predominantly younger (ages 18-24: 26%, ages 25-29: 31%, ages 30-34: 24%, ages 35-39: 14%, 40 or older: 5%)
 - Mostly white (White 88%, Black/African-American 6%, American Indian/Alaskan Native 3%, Asian 5%, Other 5%)
 - Diverse in marital status (single 40%, married 31%, divorced 4%, engaged 3%, long term relationship 21%)
 - Predominantly privately insured (private 75%, public 20%, uninsured 3%)

Reasons for seeking sterilization (n=403)	n (%)
I do not want children	378 (94)
Childhood trauma	111 (28)
Current state of the world	267 (66)
Environmental (ie. overpopulation)	232 (58)
Financial	237 (59)
I do not want to parent	336 (83)
Medical reasons	129 (32)
Moral reasons	145 (36)
Fear of pregnancy and/or childbirth	277 (69)

Barriers (n=312)	n (%)
I did not experience any barriers	73 (23)
I could not find a willing doctor	129 (41)
Distance to travel to a willing doctor	47 (15)
Cost of procedure	93 (30)
No insurance coverage	57 (18)
Long wait time until procedure	51 (16)
Other	43 (14)

When asked about regret, sterilized participants (n=149) responded in the following ways:

- 99% said “yes” to “At the time of your surgery, did you think sterilization as a permanent method of birth control was a good choice for you?”
- 98% said “no” to “Have you ever experienced regret for your decision to get sterilized?”
- 100% said “no” to “Have you considered getting your sterilization reversed?”

Conclusions and Next Steps

- Childfree individuals have a variety of reasons for seeking sterilization and may be at a lower risk of regret than parous people who are sterilized
- Share results with the childfree community
- Use open REDCap registry for future research

References

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- r/childfree. Reddit. <https://www.reddit.com/r/childfree/>.



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A note on language: the authors have chosen to use the terms “sterilization” and “sterilized” as these are the terms used by the childfree community at present