

Sterilization of Women with and without Cognitive Disabilities in the United States

What is female sterilization?

Female sterilization is a term for treatments that stop women from getting pregnant. These treatments work by keeping eggs from going into the uterus (womb). Sterilization is the most common way that women in the US keep themselves from becoming pregnant.

Though female sterilization is the most common way to avoid pregnancy, a person's class, race, disability, and ethnicity influence how many women get sterilized. Paying attention to these differences will help us understand more about:

1. Who gets sterilized?
2. How we can make sure women with disabilities get good health care?
3. How we can protect disabled women's rights to make choices about sex, relationships, pregnancy, and parenting.

What are **cognitive disabilities**?



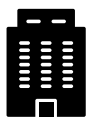
Cognitive disabilities affect the brain. These disabilities affect thinking, concentration, and learning. Some examples are dementia (including Alzheimer's), autism, and intellectual disability

Why is learning about **female sterilization** important?



There was a time when people with disabilities in the United States used to be sterilized to prevent them from making their own choices about sex, parenting, and relationships. This is because some people believed that people with cognitive disabilities should not or could not have children and be good parents.

In the early 1900s, most forced sterilizations were done on women with cognitive disabilities.



Most of these women lived in institutions. Institutions are places where many disabled people live together. People usually do not choose to live in institutions and have fewer rights than people outside institutions.



Many black, Latina, and poor women were also forced to be sterilized because it was thought that only rich white people could be good parents.



Some women may make their own choice to be sterilized, but it is still worrying that women with cognitive disabilities are more likely to be sterilized when there are other choices they can make. It is important for people with disabilities to make their own choices about sex, relationships, and parentings.

How the study was done

In this study, we compared information on sterilizations for three groups of women between the ages of 15 and 44:

1. Women without disabilities
2. Women with non-cognitive disabilities (sensory or physical disabilities such as blindness, and arthritis)
3. Women with cognitive disabilities

Our information comes from the National Survey of Family Growth, 2011-2015. The National Survey of Family Growth collects information about health, pregnancy, sex, and other related issues.

Quick facts

- Women with cognitive disabilities were **one and a half times more likely to be sterilized** than women without disabilities.
- Women with cognitive disabilities were **sterilized at a younger age** than women without disabilities.
- Women with cognitive disabilities were **almost three times more likely to have had a hysterectomy**. A hysterectomy is a major surgery that removes part or all of the uterus (womb). Sometimes people have their uterus removed to treat cancer and other health conditions that harm the uterus.
- **Women without cognitive disabilities were more likely to have less complex surgeries.**

Our findings

- We found that **women with cognitive disabilities had different sterilization patterns from women without disabilities**. This was true even if you compared people of the same age, race, and ethnicity. **Women with cognitive disabilities were often sterilized more than other women.**
- On the other hand, there were no major differences between how women without disabilities were sterilized and how women with only physical or sensory disabilities were sterilized.

Important takeaways

- Women with cognitive disabilities are more likely to be sterilized than women without cognitive disabilities. This is worrying when there are many other options available for people to choose for pregnancy prevention
- Women with cognitive disabilities are also sterilized at younger ages and are more likely to have their uterus removed than women with other disabilities.
- Knowing these facts about female sterilization is important for healthcare service providers to help them care for women with and without disabilities and help them make their own decisions about sex, relationships, and parenting.

These facts are important for policy makers to help make programs and policies that benefit women with disabilities to receive better health care.