Understanding Later Discovery of Pregnancy

On average, most people discover they are pregnant around 5 1/2 weeks after their last menstrual period.¹ Some people discover their pregnancy later--at 8 weeks, 12 weeks, or even 20 weeks and beyond. And it can happen to anyone who can become pregnant.

Later discovery of pregnancy leads to delays in seeking prenatal care,² delays in changing lifestyle habits including drug and alcohol use,³ and for some, delays in seeking abortion care.⁴

How common is later discovery of pregnancy?

Thanks to period-tracking apps, early-detection pregnancy tests, and a limited understanding of reproductive biology, people assume almost all pregnancies are discovered early. In fact, later discovery is fairly common:

![WHEN ARE PREGNANCIES DISCOVERED?](chart)

- 1 in 4 after 7 weeks
- 1 in 13.5 after 12 weeks
- 1 in 475 after 20 weeks

(And these numbers do not include pregnancies that end in miscarriage or abortion)

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**Rose** (25) is an American Indian woman who survived two physical assaults. When she got pregnant, she was receiving treatment for major depression and bipolar disorder. She used recreational drugs once a week. Rose found out she was pregnant at 19 weeks GA. She was “shocked and not happy about it.” She had been taking birth control pills, she said, and had trusted their efficacy.⁴

**Claire** contracted Hepatitis A during the coronavirus pandemic. Because the symptoms of Hepatitis A can mask pregnancy symptoms, even her medical team didn’t realize that she was pregnant. By the time her pregnancy was discovered, via abdominal sonogram, her healthcare providers were unwilling to perform an abortion. She describes that moment as “shocking, scary, and frustrating.”⁵

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Why do people discover pregnancies later?

People who experience later discovery aren’t denying their pregnancies; they’re simply not aware of them.⁶ This can happen for many different reasons, and sometimes factors that contribute to later discovery intersect and compound each other.

Learn more at WhoNotWhen.com
Common reasons for not recognizing pregnancy include:

- **Absent and/or ambiguous pregnancy symptoms**
  - Close to half of pregnancies in the US are unintended, which means many people may not attribute pregnancy symptoms.\(^7\)
  - People have different physiological responses to pregnancy and may lack symptoms that would lead to suspicion of a pregnancy or misinterpret them.\(^8\)
  - Not recognizing a pregnancy is associated with significant delays in presenting for abortion care\(^9\) and prenatal care.\(^10\)

- **Contraceptive use**
  - 18 in every 100 women who use male condoms become pregnant each year\(^12\)
  - 9 in every 100 women who take birth control pills become pregnant each year\(^11\)
  - 9 in every 100 women who use the vaginal ring become pregnant each year\(^13\)
  - 1 in every 100 women who have an IUD becomes pregnant each year\(^11\)

- **Absent or Irregular periods**
  - Changes in menstrual cycle are not only associated with pregnancy and many people experience irregular menstruation.\(^11\) Irregular periods are normal, particularly for teenage girls and perimenopausal women.
  - A number of factors can affect menstrual cycles including certain medications,\(^14\) stress, weight changes, obesity, exercise, and use of birth control as well as medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, hyperthyroidism, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS),\(^15\) and eating disorders\(^16\)

- **Being Very Young**
  - Adolescents and preadolescents do not have regular periods and may not realize the significance of missing periods. It may take 6 years or more after someone's period starts for their cycle to become regular.
  - Preadolescents may experience sexual abuse and/or become sexually active before they are psychosocially mature enough to understand and recognize a pregnancy.
  - Teens in less favorable socioeconomic circumstances (low education, low income) and teens in child welfare systems are at higher risk of teen pregnancy and birth\(^17\)

- **Previous births**
  - Spotting after pregnancy is common, and can be mistaken for menstruation\(^11\)
  - No two bodies are the same and no two pregnancies in the same body are the same. When a pregnancy looks or feels different than a previous one, it can be easy to miss the signs.

- **Outside Stressors**
  - Factors like an abusive relationship, economic hardship, housing instability, illness, and other disruptive events can make it harder for someone to psychologically process a pregnancy\(^6\)
Angel (24) didn’t realize she was pregnant until 22 weeks. She had a husband in jail and a ten-month-old daughter at home. It was that recent birth, and the stress of full-time single parenting, that made her pregnancy difficult for Angel to detect. Her daughter, she said, was her “top priority,” and she was certain that having another child would diminish the care she could provide to both.4

Nicola (18) was used to irregular periods, so she didn’t consider that she might be pregnant. As she was getting ready to go on vacation, “she became dehydrated and started vomiting.” She was advised to go to the hospital, where the doctors confirmed her pregnancy. She and her partner had already broken up. Nicola’s mother was supportive of her, and accompanied her to a women’s health clinic. Both were “upset and in disbelief.” Nicola felt “too young to care for a child,” and worried about finishing her education.10

References:

This Later Discovery Fact Sheet was developed and researched by Jenn Chalifoux