

US Supreme Court weighs restrictions on abortion pill

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The Supreme Court on Tuesday was weighing restrictions imposed by a lower court on the drug that is most widely used in the United States to terminate pregnancies.

Dozens of demonstrators gathered outside the court in downtown Washington as the nine justices began hearing oral arguments in a case involving access to the abortion pill mifepristone.

US Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar said there was no justification to "unnecessarily restrict access" to the drug, which was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2000.

"Some women could be forced to undergo more invasive surgical abortions, others might not be able to access the drug at all," Prelogar said.

The conservative-dominated court overturned the constitutional right to abortion nearly two years ago and anti-abortion groups are seeking to have mifepristone banned, claiming that despite its long track record it is unsafe.

The case stems from a ruling last year by a conservative US District Court judge in Texas, an appointee of Republican president Donald Trump, that would have prohibited mifepristone.

A conservative-dominated appeals court overturned the outright ban because the statute of limitations on challenging the FDA's approval had expired.

But the court nonetheless limited access to the drug.

Danco Laboratories, the mifepristone maker, and the administration of Democratic President Joe Biden appealed the lower court's restrictions on mifepristone to the Supreme Court.

The nation's highest court, where conservatives wield a 6-3 majority, froze the rulings by the lower court and the drug remains on the market

for the time being.

The FDA approved mifepristone for use up to seven weeks of pregnancy in 2000 and further loosened the regulations in 2016, allowing it to be used up to 10 weeks.

It lifted in-person dispensing requirements in 2021, during the COVID pandemic, allowing the drug to be distributed by mail and prescribed remotely through telemedicine.

The appeals court decision would roll back the legal limit for use of mifepristone to seven weeks, block it from being delivered by mail and require the pill to be prescribed and administered by a doctor.

'Decrease abortion access'

The latest legal skirmish over reproductive rights comes as abortion pill use is on the rise in the United States.

Medication abortion accounted for 63 percent of the abortions in the country last year, up from 53 percent in 2020, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

The actual number is likely higher, the institute said, because the figures do not take into account self-managed medication abortions outside the health care system or pills mailed to women in states where abortion is banned entirely.

"Reinstating outdated and medically unnecessary restrictions on the provision of mifepristone would negatively impact people's lives and decrease abortion access across the country," said Amy Friedrich-Karnik, Guttmacher's director of federal policy.

Some 20 states have banned or restricted abortion since the Supreme Court in June 2022 overturned the landmark Roe v. Wade ruling that enshrined the constitutional right to abortion for half a century.

Polls repeatedly show a clear majority of Americans support continued access to safe abortion, even as conservative groups push to limit the procedure—or ban it outright.

The Supreme Court is expected to issue a decision in the abortion pill case by the end of June—four months before the presidential election in which abortion is almost certain to be a major topic.

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