

WHAT IS NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING?

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is a couple's observation and acceptance of their phases of fertility for the purposes of achieving and avoiding pregnancy. Modern methods of Natural Family Planning are not to be confused with the old "rhythm" method that required regular cycles to be effective. NFP can be used by women with irregular cycles, as well as by women who are breastfeeding or premenopausal. With proper use, NFP can be 97–99% effective in avoiding pregnancy.

Signs of Fertility

NFP is based on a simple awareness of the female reproductive cycle. A woman's fertility can be monitored by observing several signs, including her **cervical mucus** and her **temperature** upon waking each morning. While the typical male is always fertile, the female can only conceive for a short time each month when ovulation occurs, about two weeks before the next menstrual period.

Several days before ovulation occurs, the woman's cervix produces a special kind of mucus. It is more stretchy and clear than other mucus, and its structure channels sperm upward towards the uterus.

Sperm can stay alive for 3 to 5 days with good quality cervical mucus, but, if not fertilized, an egg dies within 24 hours. (In the rare cases where more than one egg is released, both are released in the same 24-hour period.)

After ovulation, the hormone progesterone rises, raising the woman's temperature about half a degree Fahrenheit after ovulation and thickening the cervical mucus.

Phases of the Cycle

A woman's fertility cycle may be divided into three parts. The first part, leading up to the time of fertility, is called the **relatively infertile time**. During this time, fertility is anticipated. For couples practicing NFP, there is more of a need to be watchful of the fertility signs than during the last part of the cycle.

The second part is called the **possibly fertile time** because the body is ready to receive sperm and become pregnant. To avoid pregnancy, an experienced NFP couple will abstain from intercourse

during this phase. (Couples who are learning will need to abstain for part or all of the previous phase, too).

This phase ends soon after ovulation, and the **completely infertile time** begins. Because the egg has died, pregnancy is no longer possible.

Elements of NFP

All methods of NFP are grounded in these basic principles. By observing her cervical mucus and temperature, a woman can discern whether she is potentially fertile or not. These signs are charted each day, and soon regular patterns can be discerned. Other signs, such as the consistency and position of woman's cervix may also be charted. After some experience and with good instruction, a woman gains a "feel" for her own body that allows her to be more confident in using NFP.

How much abstinence does NFP require for a couple seeking to avoid pregnancy? From the beginning, a couple may be sure that the woman will not become pregnant during the completely infertile time, which usually lasts ten to twelve days. It takes a little longer to be confident in using the relatively infertile time. As a woman gets to know her own cycle better, the period of abstinence during the relatively infertile time decreases.

Learning NFP

Unfortunately, knowledge of NFP is not very widespread. Perhaps the biggest reason for this is lack of funding—there is not much money to be made in it. It is not typically taught by physicians or in family planning clinics.

While NFP can be learned from a book, it is recommended that a couple enroll in a class or take a correspondence or on-line course that offers follow-up with a certified NFP teacher.

Some couples use NFP in conjunction with barrier contraceptives, such as a condom or diaphragm, to allow for intercourse during the fertile time. This is commonly referred to as the "fertility awareness method" (FAM). Use of barrier contraceptives is the weakest link in this method. The failure rates of condoms and diaphragms are calculated for the whole cycle, not merely the fertile time, so the barriers may not really be as effective as conventional statistical failure rates would imply. In addition to concerns about effectiveness, there are moral, relational, and health reasons to avoid contraceptives altogether.

Overcoming Infertility

NFP is unique among family planning methods in that it can be used to **achieve pregnancy** as well as to avoid it. By enabling a couple to identify the most fertile times for intercourse, efforts can be concentrated for maximum effect.

In recent years, NFP has been especially useful for the rising number of couples experiencing problems with their fertility. Those using NFP to become pregnant will do so more easily than couples relying on random chance and more safely than those utilizing the newer fertility therapies. Many couples have testified about how they have become pregnant with NFP after many years of struggling with infertility.

Benefits of NFP

The practice of Natural Family Planning has many benefits. Unlike many contraceptives, NFP costs very little. It also has **no side effects**. Couples using NFP to prevent pregnancy will be spared the health risks of hormonal contraception, IUD's, and sterilization as well as the messiness of barrier methods, in addition to having a highly effective method of fertility control. Because it gives an **increased knowledge** about and sensitivity to one's body, many women have been able to identify and treat medical problems such as menstrual disorders, PMS, and perimenopausal symptoms. In addition to the physical benefits of NFP, there are relational benefits such as better communication and marital satisfaction between spouses.

*Learn about Natural Family Planning from an
Orthodox Christian perspective at www.orthodoxnfp.org*

Copyright © 2003 The Orthodox Natural Family Planning Association