

Family Planning

Welfare Association of NT Inc.
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Family Planning Welfare Association of the NT Inc exists to provide quality health care and education services in sexual and reproductive health

Planning your family the natural way

WHAT IS NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING?

It's a natural way of recognising a couple's fertility by learning to detect the fertile phase in the woman's menstrual cycle, and using this information to either achieve or avoid conception.

Recent research has brought natural methods of family planning to a higher degree of effectiveness.

WHAT ARE ITS ADVANTAGES?

For most people natural family planning methods are easy to use and reliable.

They're free from disadvantages like possible physical and emotional side-effects that can go with other methods. They can be used to achieve a pregnancy as well as avoid one.

But the biggest advantage is that they invite co-operation and communication between a couple.

HOW DOES NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING WORK?

Women are infertile for most of the time during the reproductive phase of their lives. In fact, there are only a few days in each menstrual cycle in which a woman can conceive. A woman using natural family planning can detect which days she is fertile and which days she is infertile. So if a couple wish to avoid a pregnancy, they know which days to avoid intercourse.

DO IRREGULAR CYCLES PREVENT THE USE OF NATURAL METHODS?

No, natural family planning relies on the ability of a woman to be aware of signs of fertility regardless of the length or regularity of the cycle. For this reason, it can be used during breastfeeding or pre-menopause.

WHAT IS OVULATION?

Ovulation means the release of a fertile egg from the ovary. It happens on one day only in each cycle.

The life span of this fertile egg is not more than 24 hours. Conception takes place when the male sperm unites with the female egg. (It must be remembered, however, that sperm can live for up to 5 days just prior to ovulation.) If conception does not occur the next period or menstrual bleed follows about 2 weeks after ovulation.

HOW IS FERTILITY RECOGNISED?

A man presumed to be fertile all the time. For a woman the most usual indicators are cervical mucus, basal temperatures and cervix changes. Many women also notice abdominal pain, blood spotting, and mood changes.

CERVICAL MUCUS

Most fertile women will be familiar with the cervical mucus symptom. It's a normal physiological event.

Many don't realise the significance of the changes in the mucus until it's explained to them.

The mucus which is secreted from the cervix changes in its appearance and texture at different times during the cycle. Usually it first appears as thick, cloudy and sticky. As ovulation approaches the mucus becomes thinner, wet, slippery and stretchy, and is called "fertile-type" mucus.

Mucus assists the sperm to travel and also influences their life span.

Sperm survival is very dependent on the cervical mucus which is known to increase their life to up to 5 days. After ovulation has occurred, if mucus is observed, it will again be sticky and cloudy.

This means that if you want to avoid pregnancy you must avoid all genital contact:

- during the days of the mucus
- until the fourth day after the last day of the fertile-type mucus.

There's a simple way of recognising these mucus changes and recording them by using a chart and coloured stamps.

BASAL TEMPERATURE

Your basal body temperature is the temperature of your body before you get out of bed in the morning and begin to move around.

A woman's basal body temperature varies during the cycle.

Special charts make the temperature pattern easy to record.

From menstruation until ovulation a woman's temperature is at a lower level.

After ovulation the temperature rises and remains at a high level until the following menstruation.

This rise in temperature confirms that ovulation has occurred. This knowledge enables a couple to determine the infertile days following ovulation.

CHANGES IN THE CERVIX

Cervical changes can be recognised around the fertile time of the cycle.

The cervix is higher, softer and open around the time of ovulation, whereas at infertile times it is lower, firmer and closed.

WHAT ARE THE 'METHODS' BASED ON THIS INFORMATION?

Determining the fertile and infertile times of a woman's reproductive life using the mucus indicator alone is commonly known as the Ovulation or Billings Method. Combining the mucus observations with temperature and other signs is commonly called the Sympto-thermal method.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE OLD RHYTHM METHOD AND THESE MORE RECENT METHODS?

The rhythm method attempts to predict the time of ovulation and the length of the whole cycle based on a woman's past menstrual history. The modern methods allow a woman by daily observation to determine more accurately in each cycle the days on which she is fertile or infertile. The rhythm method works only for women with regular cycles, but very few women have regular cycles.

WHO CAN USE NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING?

Most highly-motivated couples can use natural methods. Apart from women with regular cycles, it is also suitable for:

- breastfeeding mothers
- pre-menopausal women
- women with irregular cycles
- sub-fertile couples wishing to conceive
- couples changing from any contraceptive method.

It is not hard to use, although when first explained it may sound complicated. With experience and support while learning, it becomes easier.

HOW CAN WE LEARN NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING?

The best way is to be taught by a woman who's been trained as a teacher. This leaflet gives you only basic information about fertility. It would be unwise to try to apply the methods without the help of someone experienced in teaching natural family planning.

WHY DOES NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING APPEAL TO MANY COUPLES?

- No drugs, foreign bodies or chemicals are used
- Some couples have objections to other methods on religious or moral grounds
- Family planning becomes the responsibility of the couple rather than of an individual
- Natural family planning methods can help to develop other aspects of the marriage relationship. The practice of abstinence enables many couples to develop a broader understanding of intimacy and the expression of love.
- An awareness of fertility through natural family planning methods may help couples who have difficulty in conceiving a child.

ARE NATURAL METHODS RELIABLE?

From a scientific point of view natural methods have a reliability comparable to other methods of family planning. In practice however, reliability is very dependent on:

- high motivation
- proper instruction
- adequate supervision in the initial stages
- husband/wife co-operation

The trained instructors who teach the natural methods talk about the "fertility of the couple" not just of the woman. They see natural family planning as a way a couple can face a family planning decision together. They recommend that both the man and woman attend the instruction and any follow-up consultations.

For further information visit www.billingslife.org / 1800335860