

Patient Handout on Natural Family Planning

What is natural family planning?

Natural family planning is a method used to help a couple determine when sexual intercourse can and cannot result in pregnancy. During each menstrual cycle, one of a woman's ovaries releases an egg. This process is called ovulation. The egg moves toward the uterus through the fallopian tubes, where fertilization takes place if sperm is present. The egg will be shed later during the menstrual period if it isn't fertilized. A woman is most likely to become pregnant if sexual intercourse takes place just before, during, or just after ovulation.

During the menstrual cycle, a number of changes occur in a woman's body. By keeping track of these changes, couples can plan when to have intercourse and when to avoid intercourse, depending on whether they are trying to achieve or avoid pregnancy.

How does natural family planning work?

There are two main methods of natural family planning. The first is the mucus or ovulation method. In this method, the days just before and just after ovulation are determined by checking the woman's cervical mucus. When a woman is most likely to become pregnant, the cervical mucus is stretchy, clear and slick. The mucus during this time looks and feels much like an uncooked egg white.

The second method is called the symptothermal method. With this method, the woman takes her temperature each day with a basal body temperature thermometer and writes it down on a chart. At the time of ovulation, a woman's temperature will rise slightly. The woman also checks the consistency of her cervical mucus like she does with the mucus method. She may also notice other changes, such as pain in the area of the ovaries, bloating, low backache and breast tenderness.

In both methods, couples use a chart to keep track of the changes in the woman's body.

One of the ovulation/mucus methods, the Creighton Model System, can even be used to identify and treat gynecological disorders such as infertility, polycystic ovarian syndrome, endometriosis, painful periods, abnormal bleeding, repetitive miscarriages, hormone disorders, pelvic pain, perimenopausal symptoms, premenstrual syndrome, and postpartum depression.

How effective are these methods in helping a couple avoid pregnancy?

These methods can help a couple avoid pregnancy if the couple receives training from a specialized instructor and if they carefully follow all of the instructions provided. (Ask your doctor how to find an instructor who is specially trained in teaching natural family planning.) Both methods can be 95% to 99% effective at avoiding pregnancy when they are practiced correctly. However, if a couple doesn't follow the instructions completely, these methods will be much less effective.

Can natural family planning help a couple achieve pregnancy?

Yes. As many as 2 out of 3 couples who don't have fertility problems become pregnant if they have sexual intercourse on the days that the cervical mucus is clearest and most stretchable.

What about the rhythm method?

Many people incorrectly equate natural family planning with the rhythm method. The “rhythm method” is an older form of natural family planning based on calendar calculations of previous menstrual cycles. Because this method does not allow for common changes and variation in the menstrual cycle, it is much less reliable than the mucus and symptothermal methods. Therefore, it is generally not recommended.

What about women with irregular cycles or who are breastfeeding?

It is common for women to have menstrual cycles that are irregular (either longer or shorter than 28 days). A woman who has irregular menstrual cycles will still be able to tell when she is ovulating by watching for the changes in her body.

Special instructions have been developed for mothers who are breastfeeding their babies. Ask your teacher for these instructions if you are breastfeeding.

Helpful Websites

Ovulation Methods

www.creightonmodel.com (The Creighton Model System/NaPro Technology)

www.familyplanning.net (Family of the Americas Foundation Ovulation Method)

nfp.marquette.edu (The Marquette Method)

Symptothermal Method

www.ccli.org (The Couple-to-Couple League)

Book

Taking Charge of Your Fertility, by Toni Weschler, MPH