

Natural Family Planning Methods

Definition

Natural family planning can help a couple determine when sexual intercourse may or may not result in pregnancy. During each menstrual cycle, a woman's ovaries release an egg. This process is called ovulation. The egg moves toward the uterus through the fallopian tubes, where fertilization may take place. An unfertilized egg may live for 12 to 24 hours. If it isn't fertilized, the egg will be shed later, during the menstrual period. A woman is most likely to become pregnant if sexual intercourse takes place just before 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 or not they are trying to achieve pregnancy.

How Does It Work?

Two methods of natural family planning are currently taught. The first is the **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. Some people say that the cervical mucus during this time looks and feels 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 special 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. 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 special chart to keep track of the changes in the woman's body.

The rhythm method is no longer recommended. It is based on calendar calculations of previous menstrual cycles, which doesn't allow for normal changes in the menstrual cycle. Thus, it is not as reliable as the ovulation or symptothermal methods.

Advantages

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. Both methods are 90% to 98% effective when they are practiced correctly. However, if a couple doesn't follow the instructions completely, these methods will be much less effective. Ask your healthcare provider how to find an instructor who is specially trained in teaching natural family planning.

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

Special instructions have been developed for breast-feeding mothers. Ask your healthcare provider for instructions if you are breast-feeding.

Natural family planning does not involve the use of medicines, mechanical devices or chemicals. Side effects or risks that may occur with the use of such medicines or devices will not occur with natural family planning methods. Natural family planning methods are inexpensive. A fee is usually charged for instructional training and supplies (thermometer and charts), but there are no ongoing costs.

Use of natural family planning methods requires partners to share the responsibility for planning or avoiding pregnancy. Typically, couples who use these methods notice an increase in communication and in cooperation.

For More Information

This information provides a general overview on methods of natural family planning and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your healthcare provider to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on the subject.

Suggested website:

www.plannedparenthood.org/waystochart.HTM

The above information is from the American Academy of Family Physicians.

