

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

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WHAT IS NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING?

Natural Family Planning (NFP) consists of methods that can be used to avoid conception or enhance the likelihood of pregnancy. The World Health Organization defines natural family planning methods to be those which satisfy three criteria: the method involves sexual abstinence during the woman's fertile time in order to avoid pregnancy; daily observation and recording of the woman's fertility signs; these methods do not use devices, gadgets or pills. (WHO, 1989)

Types of NFP include the symptoms/temperature method - **Sympto-Thermal Method (STM)**; mucus method (Ovulation, Billings, Creighton); and the basal body temperature method.

Calendar rhythm and withdrawal **are not** considered to be modern and effective methods of Natural family Planning today. NFP allows fertility choices as it can be used to plan or avoid pregnancy or space the birth of children. NFP works in harmony with and respects the woman's natural reproductive cycle. Understanding, co-operation and communication between the couple are required for these methods to be effective.

WHAT IS THE SYMPTO-THERMAL METHOD?

The Sympto-Thermal Method (STM) is an effective, co-operative, scientifically based and inexpensive method of natural family planning. Awareness of a man's constant fertility and the woman's cyclic variations allows a couple to understand and accept their shared fertility. The STM can be used throughout a woman's reproductive lifespan, including situations such as breastfeeding and the premenopause.

Daily observation of the woman's basal body temperature, cervical mucus signs, changes in the cervix, and periovulatory symptoms are made and recorded on a chart. With some teaching from a Serena teacher couple, couples will learn how to chart and interpret this information in order to identify the fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle.

Charting records information about the menstrual cycle. It allows one to: discern the period of ovulation; identify the period of natural infertility; predict the onset of menstruation; follow each cycle as it unfolds; discover menstrual irregularities; detect possible causes of infertility; observe the re-establishment of ovulatory cycles after contraceptive use, breastfeeding or pregnancy; confirm early pregnancy; recognize the approach of menopause.

Knowledge of the woman's fertility signs empowers couples to make choices to postpone or engage in intercourse according to their wish to avoid, plan or space pregnancies.

A study on Canadian couples taught by Serena has found a **rate of 0.5% unplanned pregnancy** when the STM rules are observed. That is **very close to the effectiveness of the contraceptive pill**.

This method is unique in that the information can also be used to optimize the timing of intercourse **when a pregnancy is desired**. The STM does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases.

IS THE STM EFFECTIVE?

Yes. Studies have shown the Sympto-Thermal Method to be highly effective in avoiding unplanned pregnancies. For the 168 Canadian couples who participated in the Fairfield Study, an effectiveness rating of 0.5 unplanned pregnancy in 100 women was found among those who used the method correctly and consistently. A rate of 5% was found for the whole group, without consideration of misunderstanding, mistakes or breaking the rules. Effectiveness will depend on competent teaching as well as the motivation of both the man and the woman, their understanding of how their bodies work and their willingness to delay intercourse until the infertile phase of the cycle.

When a pregnancy is desired, the knowledge that a woman is ovulating in each cycle provides basic information about the woman's reproductive cycle. This enables a couple to plan the timing of intercourse prior to or at ovulation in order to conceive.

WHAT INFLUENCES THE SUCCESSFUL USE OF THE STM?

The most important factors influencing the successful use of the STM are: both partners being involved in learning and recording the signs and symptoms; teaching provided by a qualified teacher; motivation of the couple.

Continued use of the STM depends on: respect for each other's needs and wants; open communication about sexuality and intimacy; emotional maturity including patience, responsibility and self control; information and support from a teacher-couple as life situations change (e.g., charting after childbearing, during breastfeeding or premenopause).

WHO USES NFP AND WHY?

Serena teacher-couples have taught couples of childbearing age from all walks of life. Those interested in the STM choose this family planning method for a variety of reasons, which might include: searching for an effective, natural method with few side effects; dissatisfaction with other methods of birth control; seeking to know more about how their reproductive system works; wanting more control over their fertility; following faith teaching; interest in identifying the most fertile time to conceive.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE STM?

Advantages include: Highly effective; Natural with no physical side effects; Low cost; Easy to learn and use; Can be used both to avoid and plan pregnancy (reversible); Encourages awareness of natural bodily signs; Shared method of family planning; Fosters self-reliance and communication between the couple; Strengthens relationships by respecting fertility, and sharing responsibility for the gift of sexuality; Non-invasive; Provides information about reproductive health, including some causes of infertility; Can be used throughout one's reproductive lifespan; and protects future fertility.

Disadvantages include: No protection from sexually transmitted diseases; Waiting for the infertile phase of the cycle interferes with spontaneity.

HOW DOES THIS METHOD DIFFER FROM CALENDAR RHYTHM?

The STM is a modern, effective, natural method which works equally well for women with irregular or regular cycles (unlike rhythm) because it is based on the observation of day-to-day changes of fertility symptoms. With the calendar rhythm method, an attempt is made to establish the infertile period from calculations based on previous cycles. There is an element of uncertainty when cycles are irregular.

IS IT TRUE THAT YOU HAVE TO AVOID INTERCOURSE FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME WHEN YOU USE THIS METHOD?

Sexual abstinence is required only during the fertile phase of the cycle for couples wishing to avoid a pregnancy. Most loving couples, however, are surprised to find that voluntary postponement of intercourse can promote greater sexual fulfillment, mutual respect and cooperation, communication and a stronger total relationship.

CAN YOU USE STM DURING BREASTFEEDING?

Yes. After childbirth, approximately half of all women will ovulate before their first menstrual period regardless of whether they are breastfeeding or not. If a woman chooses not to breastfeed, bleeding usually returns within 6 to 7 weeks postpartum. For the breastfeeding woman, the return of ovulation and menstruation will depend on the frequency, duration and intensity of feedings, including night feeds, the mother's nutrition and health, timing of the introduction of solids and other liquids and pacifier use. The Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM) may be used in the first 6 months postpartum if there has been no bleeding and the baby is totally breastfed. If a woman is nursing her baby intensively on demand for a prolonged time, amenorrhea (absence of menstruation) may last ten months (on average). Consultation with a teacher couple during the breastfeeding period is important for further instruction and use of the breastfeeding chart to detect signs of returning fertility.

IS SUPPLEMENTING NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING WITH BARRIER METHODS OR WITHDRAWAL EFFECTIVE?

What makes natural family planning so effective is that a couple does not have intercourse during the fertile days. Using condoms, diaphragms, spermicides or withdrawal during the fertile time is not natural family planning. Pregnancies may occur. There is no method more effective than abstinence during the fertile time.

ADDITIONAL INFO, SOURCES & METHODS:

- Parishioners at St. Thomas More: acdspak@shaw.ca Dr. Andrew Spak (pronounced Spock...as in Dr. Spock!) and his wife Michelle are regular parishioners involved with Marriage Prep and speak about NFP as well.
- **Serena:** www.serena.ca; email: serena-a@telus.net; Edmonton: 780.488.5221; Rest of Alberta: 1.866.488.5221(Toll free)
- **Billings Natural Family Planning:** <http://www.billingsnaturalfamilyplanning.org/>
- **Creighton Model Fertility Care System:** <http://www.creightonmodel.com/>
- One More Soul: <http://www.omsoul.com/index.php>
- Tip from 'happy' parishioner: '*Clear Blue*' produces a product that helps determine fertility period with high accuracy, although it can get expensive. At earlypregnancytest.com you can buy ovulation and pregnancy tests in bulk for awesome prices.