

# natural methods



## NATURAL METHODS

Natural family planning is about understanding fertility and finding out those days in the month when a woman can become pregnant. By observing and recording the various natural signs and symptoms that occur during the menstrual cycle you can learn to identify your fertile time. Then, unless you plan to have a baby, you should avoid sexual intercourse at that time. To avoid pregnancy you must make sure that the sperm and the egg do not meet.

*Note:* The Irish Family Planning Association strongly recommends that should you decide to use natural family planning, you attend an instruction course by a teacher in natural methods. Such instruction is now available from family planning centres and other organisations countrywide.

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

Natural family planning works by observing and recording your body's different natural signs or fertility indicators on each day of your menstrual cycle (see below). The main fertility indicators are:

- » recording your body temperature
- » monitoring cervical secretions (cervical mucus)
- » calculating how long your menstrual cycle lasts.

Changes in these fertility indicators can help you to identify your fertile time. You can also use fertility monitoring devices (see below). There are three natural family planning methods outlined towards the end of this leaflet.

- Temperature
- Cervical Mucus
- Sympto-Thermal Method (combination of methods).

## HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?

Many studies have been carried out on natural methods which show a range of effectiveness from 2 pregnancies for every 100 couples using the method for a year to 20 pregnancies per 100 couples using the method for a year. Much depends on your reasons for using the method and the importance to you of success.

Perhaps more than for any other method, motivation, commitment, careful observance of the rules and good instruction are important for success.

## WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES?

- » Using fertility awareness makes you more aware of your fertility and can help to plan a pregnancy or to avoid a pregnancy.
- » It does not involve using any chemicals or physical products.
- » There are no physical side-effects.
- » It can help you recognise normal and abnormal vaginal secretions.
- » It can help you to communicate about your fertility and sexuality.
- » It is acceptable to all faiths and cultures.

## WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES?

- » Charts can be difficult to interpret and you will need expert help.
- » The time of ovulation can vary. Illness, shock, stress, even a holiday, can change a woman's cycle.
- » You have to avoid having intercourse for a part of each month if you wish to avoid pregnancy. Some couples find that they can use a condom occasionally as a backup to Natural Methods, especially during the fertile time.
- » Does not prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections.

## WHO IS IT SUITABLE FOR?

Natural family planning methods are suitable for most women provided that they receive good instruction and support.

Natural family planning may not be a suitable method for some women who do not have periods.

A teacher can help you with your charts. This help is most important if you are coming off the pill, have just had a baby, are breastfeeding or approaching the menopause.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

The menstrual cycle is the time from the first day of your period to the day before your next period starts. The average length of the menstrual cycle is around 28 days, although many women have longer or shorter cycles and this is normal. Regardless of how long or short the cycle is, ovulation (when the ovaries release an egg) will usually happen around 10–16 days before the start of the next period.

# NATURAL METHODS CONTD.

During your menstrual cycle:

- » Eggs develop in your ovaries and usually one is released.
- » The mucus in the cervix (entrance to the womb) changes to allow sperm to pass more easily through the cervix to reach the egg.
- » The lining of the womb thickens to prepare for a possible pregnancy.
- » If the egg is not fertilised by sperm and you don't get pregnant the womb sheds its lining as your period, which signals the beginning of a new menstrual cycle.

The menstrual cycle is controlled by your body's natural hormones – oestrogen and progesterone.

## METHODS OF NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

### TEMPERATURE METHOD

A woman's body temperature goes up after ovulation. You can chart this by taking your temperature every day as soon as you wake up. It is important to do this before getting up or having anything to eat or drink. The temperature of the body at rest is called basal body temperature (BBT). Ideally it should be taken each day at the same time to give the most accurate record. A special thermometer (fertility thermometer) should be used. This shows the small temperature changes more easily. These thermometers and special charts to record the readings are available by post or by calling at a family planning clinic. When you have recorded a temperature for three days in a row which is higher than all the previous six days it may indicate the fertile time is over. The difference will be about 0.2°C – 0.4°C (0.4°F – 0.8°F). Your temperature can change, however, for reasons other than ovulation. If you are ill with a fever it can go up. If you are taking painkilling drugs (even aspirin) it can go down. You will then need expert help to interpret your charts. This method by itself does not help you to find out which are the infertile days before ovulation.

### CERVICAL MUCUS METHOD

This method (also referred to as 'the ovulation method') relies on the fact that the fluid (mucus) produced at the entrance of the womb (cervix) changes in texture and increases in amount about five days before ovulation. At first it is thick, sticky and opaque, then it becomes

clearer, wetter and slippery so that sperm can travel through it more easily. This slippery wetness signals the most fertile days. Intercourse should be avoided from the first sensation or observation of mucus until four or five days after the slippery wet sensation has gone. Days of no mucus ('dry' days) are infertile. Many women can learn the different feelings of 'wetness' and 'dryness' quite easily but the method should be learned from a properly trained natural family planning teacher. Intercourse should also be avoided during periods, as this can mask mucus changes.

### SYMPTO-THERMAL METHOD (combination of methods)

This method uses a combination of basal body temperature and cervical mucus with other signs. The most important of the other signs is the position, softness/ firmness of the cervix, and whether the entrance is slightly open or tightly closed. Other signs include pain in the back or lower abdomen and breast discomfort. It can take time to recognise some of the signs which are linked to ovulation. You should have a properly trained teacher to help you. You are very much more likely to avoid conceiving if you have intercourse only in the time after ovulation up to the next period than if you use the time after a period and before ovulation.

*NOTE:* The Calendar Methods of trying to pinpoint the fertile time in the cycle based on dates of previous periods and cycle lengths is so unreliable that it is not recommended as a method of family planning on its own. It may however provide a useful cross-check with other natural methods.

## FINALLY A WORD ON FERTILITY MONITORING DEVICES

You can buy a number of different fertility devices at pharmacies. They work by monitoring changes in temperature, urine or saliva. In Ireland the main product available is Persona. This consists of a small handheld computerised monitor and a series of urine test sticks which measure hormonal changes. Persona interprets these changes and can predict the fertile and infertile times of your menstrual cycle. Computerised thermometers work by combining information about the length of your menstrual cycle and temperature. More research is needed about the effectiveness of these products.

NOTES:

TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT AT AN IFPA MEDICAL CENTRE OR FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OUR SERVICES PLEASE CALL:

IFPA, 5-7 Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin 1  
T: +353 (1) 872 7088

IFPA, The Square, Tallaght, Dublin  
T: +353 (1) 459 7685

THE IFPA ALSO OPERATES A NATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICE PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND DETAILS OF STI AND CONTRACEPTIVE SERVICES IN YOUR AREA.

T: +353 (1) 8069444  
E: [post@ifpa.ie](mailto:post@ifpa.ie)

**DON'T FORGET** – THIS LEAFLET CAN ONLY OUTLINE BASIC INFORMATION ON NATURAL METHODS OF CONTRACEPTION. INFORMATION IS BASED ON EVIDENCE AND MEDICAL OPINION AT THE TIME OF PUBLICATION HOWEVER YOU MAY COME ACROSS CONFLICTING ADVICE ON CERTAIN POINTS. RING OR VISIT YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU ARE WORRIED OR UNSURE ABOUT ANYTHING.

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