your guide to natural family planning

Helping you choose the method of contraception that is best for you
Natural family planning

This leaflet gives information on how natural family planning can help you to avoid pregnancy.

Fertility awareness involves being able to identify the signs and symptoms of fertility during the menstrual cycle so you can plan or avoid pregnancy.

Questions & Answers

What is the menstrual cycle? ................................................... 3
How does natural family planning work? ........................... 4
How long does the fertile time last? ................................. 4
How effective is natural family planning? .............................. 5
What are the advantages of natural family planning? ............... 5
What are the disadvantages of natural family planning? .............. 6
Can a good use natural family planning? ............................. 6
How do I record the fertility indicators? .............................. 6
How do I record the temperature fertility indicators? ............... 9
Do I need to take my temperature at a particular time? ............ 3
Can anything alter the temperature readings? ...................... 3
How do I monitor the cervical secretions fertility indicators? ....... 9
Can I combine temperature and cervical secretions fertility indicators? ...... 6
What is 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. 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 – estrogen and progesterone.

**How does natural family planning 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. 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 How do I use fertility monitoring devices? on page 11).

**How long does the fertile time last?**

The fertile time lasts for around 8 to 9 days of each menstrual cycle. This is because the egg lives for up to 24 hours. Occasionally, more than one egg is released (within 24 hours of the first egg being released) and sperm can live inside a woman's body for up to 7 days. This means that if you have sex as much as 7 days before the egg is released, you may still get pregnant.
How effective is natural family planning?

How effective any contraceptive method is depends on how old you are, how often you have sex and whether you follow the instructions.

If 100 sexually active women don't use any contraception, 80 to 90 will become pregnant in a year.

If used according to teaching and instructions, natural family planning methods are up to 98% effective, depending on which method is used. This means that up to 2 women in 100 will get pregnant in a year.

If natural family planning methods are not used according to instructions, more women will get pregnant.

Natural family planning is more effective when taught by a specialist natural family planning teacher, and when more than one fertility indicator is used. Some people choose to combine their fertility awareness knowledge with male or female condoms – this is sometimes known as fertility awareness combined methods. The effectiveness of this depends on how well you use male or female condoms.

What are the advantages of natural family planning?

• 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 of natural family planning?

- It takes 3 to 6 menstrual cycles to learn effectively.
- You have to keep daily records.
- Some events, such as illness, lifestyles, stress or travel, may make fertility indicators harder to interpret.
- You need to avoid sex or use male or female condoms during the fertile time.
- Natural methods don’t protect you against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Can anyone use natural family planning?

Most women can use natural methods as long as they receive good instructions and support. They can be used at all stages of your reproductive life, whatever age you are. Natural family planning may not be a suitable method for some women who do not have periods.

It may take longer to recognise your fertility indicators and to start to use natural family planning if you have irregular cycles, or at certain times, for example after stopping hormonal contraception, after having a baby, during breastfeeding, after an abortion or miscarriage, or when approaching the menopause.

How do I record the fertility indicators?

Some natural methods rely on using only 1 of the fertility indicators. Other methods use 2 or more indicators, which is more effective.