

# Natural Family Planning

## What is it?

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is a means of either avoiding or achieving pregnancy without artificial devices or chemicals. Women learn to predict their fertile times and either abstain from, or have sex, as desired.

Billing's Ovulation Method is a form of NFP, relying on mucus changes to predict fertile times. NFP is more suited for conception, rather than contraception. It is not recommended as a contraceptive method for those women for whom a pregnancy would be disastrous. It is highly desirable that people who choose NFP as a method of contraception, spend time with a doctor or nurse, to make sure they fully understand it.

A combination of the following can be used to predict fertile times:

- regularity of cycles and length of time between one period and the next
- changes in the mucus ( sticky discharge) produced by the cervix
- temperature changes
- commercial products

## What are the advantages?

- the method is totally natural and involves no chemicals
- it allows women to be aware of the natural changes in their bodies
- it can be used either to avoid or plan a pregnancy
- with strict adherence to the rules, it is effective
- it is a method that couples use together
- it best suits couples in committed, cooperative relationships

## What are the disadvantages?

- it may take up to six cycles to learn effectively
- there are extended periods when sex is avoided and this may correspond to the time of a woman's strongest desire for sex
- daily records need to be kept
- indicators of fertility may be changed by events such as illness, having sex and stress
- both the woman and the partner need to cooperate; this requires lengthy periods of planned abstinence (not having sex)
- there is no protection against sexually transmissible infections

## What happens in a normal menstrual cycle?

A cycle is defined as the length of time from the start of one period until the start of the next; the first day of a menstrual period is defined as day one. For a woman with a 28-day cycle, an egg will usually be produced (ovulation) sometime between day 11 and day 17; the release of the egg is responsible for the timing of the next period. An egg will survive for only 24 hours and the next period usually will come 11-17 days later. Sperm usually survive for 3 days but occasionally may survive up to 7 days. In this situation a woman may fall pregnant anywhere from day 4 to day 18.

## *Timing of cycle*

Often referred to as the "Rhythm method", this is the least reliable of all the methods and is not recommended as a form of contraception. It involves calculating the safe days from the expected timing of periods, and even women who are "like clock work", may have an early or late ovulation, and hence a fertile time that is different than expected. This may occur for all sorts of reasons and is impossible to predict in advance.

## ***Temperature***

The body temperature rises shortly after ovulation occurs and remains raised until the next menstrual period begins; it then drops. However, if pregnancy occurs, the temperature will remain high. Your temperature needs to be taken either vaginally or orally first thing in the morning before getting up. A digital electronic thermometer is accurate and quick. The rise will be at least 0.2°C, but may be as high as 0.5°C. The fertile time ends when you have recorded temperatures for three days in a row that are higher than the previous six days. The three days of consistently higher temperatures may only be recognised retrospectively. It is important to keep in mind that temperatures may fluctuate for all sorts of reasons, such as having a cold, sleeping in, or taking painkillers.

## ***Mucus***

The cervix (top part of the vagina that connects it to the uterus) produces mucus that varies with the time of the menstrual cycle.

Straight after a period finishes, you may notice no mucus or scant flaky mucus for a few days. There is a dry sensation on the vulva (skin outside the vagina). In those who have short cycles, the mucus may be noticeable immediately and in those with longer cycles the presence of mucus may be delayed.

The presence of mucus is the first sign of fertility. There is a sensation of wetness on the vulva and initially the mucus is moist and sticky and may be white and cloudy. Over the next few days the mucus becomes more watery, clear and elastic. It is often referred to as having a raw egg white appearance. At this time, a piece of mucus can be stretched between two fingers without breaking. The day of the highest mucus production is known as “*the peak*”. This is often only recognised retrospectively and is the time of peak fertility.

Shortly after ovulation, the mucus changes and becomes thicker, more cloudy and breaks easily when stretched. This usually corresponds with a temperature rise and the sensation at the vulva is dry.

## ***Commercially available ovulation predictors***

These kits mostly rely on a urine test to measure a hormone that rises markedly for a short period of time just before ovulation. They are expensive and most helpful to women wanting to maximise their chances of falling pregnant. They can be used to predict the late safe days in a menstrual cycle, by counting four days after a positive test result of this hormone. In Europe, kits using a combination of urine, saliva and temperature to predict fertility are available.

### **How do I use the methods?**

A combination of interpretation of mucus patterns and temperature is helpful. By using temperature alone, the early fertile days cannot be predicted. Although the mucus method can be used alone with reasonable success, many women feel more reassured by checking what they are experiencing with their vaginal mucus, against their temperature.

A difficulty of mucus interpretation is that sexual excitement, infections, semen and menstrual blood can mimic and/or conceal the effects of fertile mucus and make signs difficult to interpret.

### **To avoid a pregnancy it is recommended that:**

- sex should be **avoided** until the menstrual cycle is finished.  
In women with short cycles, mucus production may start during the menstrual period without being recognised, as the menstrual blood conceals the presence of early fertile mucus.
- once the period is finished, sex may be **had** on alternate nights until the first appearance of fertile mucus.

### **Then**

- On the first appearance of the fertile mucus, sex should be **avoided** until 4 days after ‘*the peak*’ mucus symptom. This should coincide with recorded temperatures being higher for 3 days in a row. (See *Temperature*.)

In the days before ovulation, sex **is avoided first thing in the morning** as there may have been an unnoticed mucus change overnight.

**What if I don't get any of these changes?**

Most women can learn to predict ovulation by changes in their bodies. There is a small percentage of women who ovulate normally but get confusing temperature changes and little or no change in mucus patterns. Unfortunately for these women, natural family planning isn't suitable to prevent pregnancy. Another explanation is that some women, despite having regular periods, don't ovulate every month.

**Can I use these methods with other methods?**

Some women successfully combine use of barrier methods such as condoms and diaphragms with NFP. It cannot be used in conjunction with any hormonal contraception.

**How well does it work?**

It is difficult to be specific about failure rates. This method is more effective the longer it is practised and the stronger the motivation to avoid a pregnancy. Failure rates in the first year of use vary between 1-25 pregnancies per 100 women. However, any sex outside the rules will lead to an increased risk of pregnancy. Many women have their strongest libido during their fertile times.

**What do I do if I have sex during the fertile time and don't want to fall pregnant?**

If you have sexual intercourse during a fertile time of your cycle and you don't wish to fall pregnant, emergency contraception can be considered as soon as possible. Emergency contraception is available without a prescription over the counter from pharmacies, some medical clinics and FPV. See the FPV Emergency Contraception pamphlet for more detailed information.

If emergency contraception is taken, then Natural Family Planning cannot be used for the remainder of that cycle.



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