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Natural Family Planning: Uncovering the Beauty of our Bodies

BY TROY WOYTEK, CAMPUS MINISTER

According to the USCCB website, "*Natural Family Planning (NFP) is an umbrella term for certain methods used to achieve and avoid pregnancies. These methods are based on observation of the naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of a woman's menstrual cycle. Couples using NFP to avoid pregnancy abstain from intercourse and genital contact during the fertile phase of the woman's cycle. No drugs, devices, or surgical procedures are used to avoid pregnancy.*"

As stated, NFP uses methods of reading natural biological signs or indicators of fertility in a woman's body. The most common methods used to monitor and read the signs of fertility are: Cervical Mucus methods, Sympto-thermal methods, and the Sympto-Hormonal methods.

The **Cervical Mucus methods** (sometimes known as the Creighton Model) observe the changes in cervical fluids that take place naturally in a woman as a result of ovulation each month. The vagina is actually a poor environment for the survival of sperm. However, when a woman's body is getting ready to ovulate, estrogen is released and a fluid called cervical mucus is produced that essentially helps the sperm survive inside the vagina as the sperm makes it way through the cervix into the uterus and eventually toward an egg. Each day of a woman's cycle the mucus is observed for amount, consistency, and color, which are the major signs that signal changes.

The **Sympto-thermal methods** combine the cervical mucus observations with basal body temperature readings and cervical changes (primary signs of fertility). This method also observes secondary signs of fertility such as breast tenderness, back pain, etc. Basal body temperature is the reading of the core temperature of a person. During the pre-ovulatory phase the temperature typically stays at a lower level, but as the ovulation phase begins and estrogen is released the temperature rises at ovulation or shortly after. This typically confirms the cervical mucus readings for a couple. In addition to the cervical mucus changing during the ovulation phase, the cervix actually loosens and opens up in anticipation of ovulation so that sperm can make it ways through to the uterus. This change in the cervix can be observed by the woman.

Finally, the **Sympto-Hormonal methods** (sometimes known as the Marquette method) combine all of the above while using a fertility monitor. The fertility monitor is a hand held computer device that can detect two reproductive hormones through the woman's urine. Typically the cervical mucus and basal body temperature readings are used as a way of confirming or double checking the readings of the monitor. Each day during the pre-ovulatory phase the woman uses a urine test to determine her fertility.

For all of these methods a charting system is used, usually maintained by the husband, to record the fertility of the woman and the patterns of the woman's cycle each month. The charting is essential to the process, especially for woman who have irregular cycles because it helps the couple keep track of changes better.

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Myths of NFP

NFP is the Rhythm method

Although the rhythm method is a natural way of avoiding or achieving pregnancy with the development of better reproductive knowledge and inaccuracy of the method the Catholic Church no longer endorses the Rhythm Method as part of Natural Family Planning.

NFP is not scientific and it is developed by Catholic bishops who aren't doctors to control our fertility.

Modern NFP methods have in fact been developed and tested by real doctors, nurses, and researchers in the medical field. The methods (demonstrated on page 1) are rooted in our medical science knowledge of the woman's reproductive system. NFP uses this knowledge to work with our reproductive system rather than work against it by suppressing it with foreign substances. Effectiveness of the methods has been documented and confirmed by scientific research and published in a variety of articles and books.

NFP just leads to large families and is ineffective compared to other ways of avoiding pregnancy.

Scientific research has shown that the Sympto-hormonal method when practiced correctly is 99% effective (93% is the typical success rate with incorrect use factored in). The Sympto-thermal method is 98% effective when practiced correctly (89% for typical use factoring in incorrect use). Compare this with an IUD, which is 99.9% effective (perfect use) and 99.4% effective (typical use), the pill, which is 99.7% effective (perfect use) and 92% effective (typical use), and condoms, which are 98% effective (perfect use) and 85% effective (typical use). Essentially what this means is that NFP practiced correctly is just about as effective as the pill or an IUD and is as effective as using a condom to avoid pregnancy.

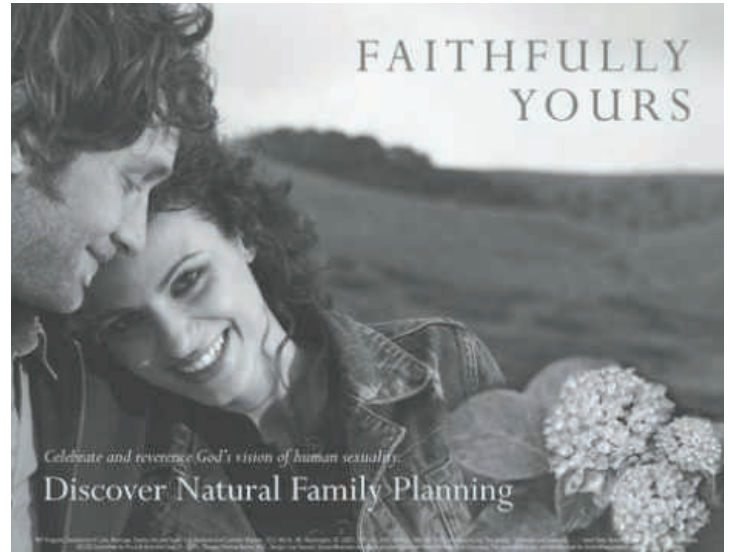
You only get to have sex a couple times a month with NFP.

Actually it is more like 15-20 days. The typical menstrual cycle of a woman is about 28-32 days long. The first 4-5 days are menstruation (non-fertile), then typically there are some days before fertility starts to rise (usually 3-7 days). Once the fertility phase (no sex) begins there are usually 4-5 days before ovulation. Once

"NFP couples have less than a 5% divorce rate"

ovulation happens there are typically 4 days of

abstaining. After ovulation every woman has 12-16 days before they menstruate again. If you take away the 3-4 days of abstaining after ovulation, you are left with 8-9 days of non-fertility. Totaled up, with an average length cycle, a married couple can have sex at the very least 10 days a month (short cycle), but more likely 17-20 days a month or 19-22 days a month if you include menstruation days in a normal cycle. That is considerably way more than the average married couple has sex in a given month.



NFP only works for women who have regular cycles.

Because the methods used in NFP are based on natural signals that a woman's body goes through every month, as long as those signals are being interpreted properly it shouldn't matter whether a woman's cycle is regular or irregular for it to work. The signs are monitored day to day and so fertility is known day to day. At the very least the constant for every woman is that once they ovulate their cycle will end in 12-16 days. NFP can be used during breastfeeding, just before menopause, and in other special circumstances.

When rare and special circumstances do arise for a woman with her cycle there are NFP specialists who can help the married couple interpret the signs of fertility. I know several women who have certain conditions that complicate their monthly cycle, but they are still able to use NFP through the guidance of NFP specialists.

NFP is too complicated and is too hard to follow.

If you are taught by an NFP teacher it is rather simple to practice and it is even being successfully taught around the world in developing countries with less educated people than the U.S. Although NFP might be more complicated than putting on a condom or popping a pill, it teaches you about the complex and natural processes of a woman's body. Contraception doesn't teach you anything about your body and it doesn't encourage learning the reproductive system of a woman. NFP also involves both people in the marriage so it encourages communication within the marriage and doesn't leave reproduction up to one person in the marriage. Finally, I would add that even though NFP involves more sacrifice than forms of contraception, our faith teaches that sacrificial love is the greatest form of love. No marriage is successful without sacrifice and so I wonder if it should be any different for our sex lives. In my own marriage, the times that we abstain from sex can be a fruitful time of creatively finding ways to channel our sexual energy and desires into conversation and emotional connection.

NFP is just a way for the Catholic Church to suppress our sexuality.

Although NFP is taught by the Catholic Church and contraception is taught to be morally wrong, NFP is not exclusively used by people for religious reasons. NFP has

actually become more popular, even among non-religious people, because of its natural ways of monitoring fertility. More and more people are becoming cautious about putting foreign substances in their bodies to control their fertility because of the possible short and long term side effects. I know there are lots of conflicting studies out there about linking contraception to different types of cancer and other health problems, so I will not affirm or deny those studies. However, I will simply say that there is nothing potentially harmful in practicing NFP to your body, your spouses' body, or the body of your baby if you should conceive. In addition, the Catholic Church wants us to have the most fulfilling sexuality possible and that also means to have the best sex possible. This leads to the next myth.

NFP doesn't allow spontaneity in your sex life.

It is true that during certain periods of the month you have to abstain from sex and so if you or your spouse has the urge to have sex you must abstain if you want to avoid pregnancy. However, in my own experience and having talked to other couples who use NFP, two things happen as a result of temporarily abstaining each month.

First, you learn as a couple to be romantic and intimate in ways that don't involve



Clearblue Fertility Monitor

sexual intercourse, which encourages the overall health of your marriage in the long run. Second, because you know approximately when you get to have sex, there is a lot of build up to it, which makes it really exciting and creates anticipation. Finally, the Catholic Church knows that sex is the most intimate union between human beings and in order for someone to have the best sex possible it means holding nothing back and having the best intentions possible. Obviously that is an ideal and as a married person (others would confirm this) the ideal doesn't always happen because as humans we don't always have the best intentions or something may hold us back emotionally. But, it becomes even more difficult to achieve the ideal (best union possible) if we use contraception because each person is saying "I want to give my whole self except for the part that may produce life."

Benefits of Practicing NFP

My wife and I were amazed out how little we knew about the woman's body and how its reproductive system worked. We live in a culture of the "pill" and so there is no need to really learn the truth of how our reproductive systems work. But that is one of the great benefits of practicing NFP, you learn how the body works and why it works the way it does. So much so, that when something isn't going right with your body you can figure out the real cause because through charting NFP gives a properly trained doctor the ability to see the root cause of reproductive or menstrual cycle issues such as hormonal imbalances, polycystic ovaries, or endometriosis. In a medical culture that typically just prescribes the "pill" to cover up these medical issues, NFP can help a woman and her doctor actually address these issues.

NaPro Technology

Natural Procreative Technology is a new women's health science that monitors and maintains a woman's reproductive and gynecological health. It provides medical and surgical treatments that cooperate completely with the reproductive system. Check out the link below.

As stated before, another benefit is that NFP is natural, which means you are not putting any potentially harmful chemicals in your body.

Studies show that NFP couples have happier marriages and are more likely to be satisfied with their sex life. In fact, studies show that NFP couples have less than a 5% divorce rate as compared to the almost 50% divorce rate in the overall population and the 23% divorce rate amongst Catholics overall. One large reason for this is that NFP couples have enhanced communication in their marriage. Both people are encouraged, if not required to communicate with each other about their sexuality. NFP does not simply make fertility or reproduction the responsibility of the woman. Both the woman and the man take active roles. I know that in my family anything I do with my body has consequences for not only me, but my wife and even my kids, and my reproductive health is not excluded from that; the same is true for my wife and the choices she makes with her body. NFP reinforces the sacramental teaching of marriage that two individuals become one flesh and that is why we discern together, as best we can, how to make our bodies in one flesh an authentic expression of God's love.



Where Can I Learn More About NFP?

- Go to the Office of NFP on the Archdiocese of St. Louis website: www.archstl.org
- Marquette Institute for NFP: <http://nfp.marquette.edu/>
- Creighton Model: <http://www.creightonmodel.com/>
- Couple to Couple League: <http://www.ccli.org/nfp/>
- NaPro Technology: <http://www.naprotechnology.com/>



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