

NFP Matters

NFP — What Is It Anyway?

Ask the average American for a description of Natural Family Planning (NFP), and you will probably get a blank look or a reference to calendar rhythm and parenthood, but modern NFP is a family planning method that should be much better known and respected.

Based on observable signs in a woman's body which reliably reflect the woman's state of fertility, NFP can be used throughout the course of her reproductive lifetime — during regular or irregular cycling, breastfeeding, or premenopause. A couple learns to chart and interpret this information. If a pregnancy is to be avoided, the couple abstains from intercourse during the fertile time. If a pregnancy is desired, the couple uses the same information to identify the time of maximum fertility each cycle and focuses intercourse on those days, thereby increasing their chance of pregnancy.

NFP is based on scientific knowledge. The man is constantly fertile because he is constantly producing sperm. A woman is fertile only part of the cycle.

During the menstrual cycle, hormones trigger the unfolding of the woman's fertility cycle. As her body prepares for ovulation, a cervical discharge is produced which signals the fertile time. This is a key factor for fertility. Cervical mucus aids sperm survival. Sperm usually die within hours after intercourse; however, if good cervical mucus is present, sperm can live 3 to 5 days. This mucus can easily be observed during a woman's daily personal care.

During or shortly after this cervical mucus is observed, ovulation occurs. Usually only one egg is released; if a second egg is released, it will be within a 24 hour time span. After ovulation, the egg cell lives only about 12 to 24 hours, if not fertilized.

The hormone progesterone, which is secreted after ovulation, causes the woman's waking temperature to rise about one-half of a degree and it remains at the higher level until the next menstrual period. Temperature taking can be incorporated into the daily routine with little difficulty.

Couples can learn to observe and interpret the body signs. According to World Health Organization findings, 98 percent of women can learn to identify the mucus symptom in the first cycle of observation. Through specialized classes, they can learn to identify their own times of infertility in the cycle. Modern NFP is not rhythm, a method of family planning based on past history and mathematical computations, but a method based on day-to-day observations which reliably reflect the woman's fertility. NFP gives couples the knowledge they need to identify their own unique fertile time and achieve their family planning intention. JMCL

Why Use NFP?

With a variety of artificial birth control options easily available, some wonder why anyone would bother with NFP. Let's find out what Natural Family Planners have to say. Northwest Family Services routinely surveys its NFP couples one year after they initially learned. Couples were asked to identify all the reasons for using NFP rather than contraception. Most people selected more than one reason.

In a secular and individualistic society, it may be surprising, but 74 percent of the couples choose NFP for moral and religious reasons. The negative side effects of contraception or the concern over how it can affect one's future fertility motivates some people to switch to NFP. Concern over health and dissatisfaction with artificial birth control motivated 63 percent and 41 percent respectively to opt for NFP. As spouses blend roles and see the value in sharing important areas of their lives, a method that involves the couple is important. Forty-one percent of the couples liked the fact that NFP involved the couple.



Women especially find this information helpful. The self-knowledge that comes from observing and charting can help pinpoint potential health problems, assist in achieving a pregnancy, and be an effective form of family planning.

Husbands gain a lot as well. One man summed it well, "NFP fulfills the goals we have in marriage: communication, faith, shared commitment, and family. It is challenging to use. But when we have struggles, I can ultimately see the benefits. I certainly don't like the alternatives. Over the last 10 years, I've seen my own growth. I like to say 'we cycle together now.'" RF

Does It Work?

Family planning “effectiveness” is complex. First, one needs to distinguish between the ability of the method to assist a couple to achieve a pregnancy or to avoid a pregnancy. NFP is the only method of family planning which can actually assist a couple in becoming pregnant. In fact, almost all couples with typical fertility who practice focused intercourse, can expect to achieve a pregnancy by the sixth cycle.

Second, the seriousness of a couple’s intent to avoid a pregnancy should be considered. This is the most significant factor affecting their use of a family planning method. When the effectiveness is evaluated, the study participants are usually divided into at least two groups. The first group includes people who correctly understand and consistently apply the method for avoiding pregnancy; the second are those who are less thorough in their use of the method. As most couples change their family planning intention several times throughout their married lives, one need not wonder why there is a range of effectiveness for a given family planning method.

Third, one must consider the effectiveness of a family planning method in actual use. For this we should differentiate the methods of NFP. The Ovulation Method (OM) relies on a single symptom, the cervical mucus observation, whereas the Sympto-Thermal Method (STM) utilizes several signs in combination for a crosscheck approach. The Sympto-Thermal Method has an effectiveness in actual use between 90 - 99+% depending upon the couple’s intention to avoid a pregnancy.

NFP is 90
to 99%
effective

“The peace of mind, soul, and health which I derive from NFP is the benefit. In addition, my appreciation for my husband has really grown. For us, some of the exciting concepts of NFP include the couple phenomenon and the load sharing as well as the covenant aspect of marriage.”

As was mentioned, the motivation of the couple is critical to their use of a family planning method. With NFP this means a willingness to share in the decision-making and to work cooperatively as they maintain or increase their family size. Another factor associated with a couple’s successful use of NFP is their understanding of the technical details of the method. Major strides have been made in the NFP educational approach such as thorough teacher education programs with practicums, personal chart review, and national standards. RF

If It Is So Great, Then...

Why do half the women discontinue using the Pill in the first year? Let us count the reasons: nausea, headaches, fluid retention, weight gain, acne, depression, decreased libido, hypertension, metabolism difficulties, and unusual bleeding to name a few.

Think about what it means to “take the Pill.” A healthy woman ingests a strong, synthetic hormone that permeates every cell of her body 365 days a year so that one cell, hopefully, will be immobilized twelve or thirteen days out of the year. More and more women are saying, “The Pill is not for me.” One woman was tending her organically grown garden when it suddenly occurred to her that she was putting chemicals into her body that she wouldn’t put into her compost pile. A husband commented after learning NFP, “It was a great day when we flushed those pills down the toilet.”

Women have provided the leadership in making public the severity of the side effects from the Pill in an attempt to counter the cavalier attitude that many have regarding hormonal contraceptives. Seasonale is a formulation of the Pill meant to be taken daily for three months at a time. Depo-Provera is a powerful hormonal contraceptive injection. It has long lasting effects which cannot be switched off if the woman changes her mind. Both are meant to offset the woman’s forgetfulness.

There are intrauterine devices (IUDs), which are objects inserted into the woman’s uterus. In an attempt to circumvent possible lawsuits, health care providers are asked to screen potential IUD wearers to avoid some of the considerable and serious complications women have suffered with its use. For example, IUD users have experienced ectopic pregnancy, pelvic inflammatory disease with infertility, and perforated uterus.

The Pill, Depo, and the IUD are not mere contraceptives. These devices affect the uterine lining, making it hostile to any newly conceived human person. Thus, they are properly called abortifacients when they work by preventing implantation rather than fertilization. Some in the medical field have redefined pregnancy as occurring at implantation rather than fertilization in order to avoid this controversy. However, changing the definition does not change the reality.

Diaphragms and cervical caps have high pregnancy rates, odor, and urinary tract and pelvic infections. But the main reason couples don’t like these barrier methods, including condoms, is that they don’t like to suit up to “make love.”

The number one contraceptive for the thirty-something group is sterilization. There can be complications from this elective surgery. Women tend to suffer greater hormonal complications after sterilization. Men experience testicular pain and an increased risk of prostate cancer. Finally, the door is closed prematurely on further children.

It is no wonder that a number of years back Rolling Stone magazine featured an article entitled “The Birth Control Blues.” It is clear there are no easy solutions in the family planning area. So if people talk about the “dark side” of NFP, it needs to be placed in the perspective of other methods of family planning. NFP has no physical side effects, is highly effective, and can be used to achieve or avoid a pregnancy. NFP truly can be a blessing. RF

He Says...

Almost all men, single, married, or celibate, are baffled by this “woman” thing. Women were presented to us by our fathers as something inexplicable. You accept them on faith because there is no “real” understanding them. We were given the impression that only upon death, when the veil is to be lifted from our eyes, will we see them in their true light. Couple this with the controversy regarding the Catholic Church teachings on sexual issues and you often get more than you bargained for.

Early in our marriage, my wife and I went to a seminar on Church issues. One of the talks was on sexuality and family planning. We listened to the couple talk about NFP and what a great benefit it was to their marriage. This couple was so at ease with one another and so in tune that you had to be at least curious about it.

NFP was definitely the road less traveled and it has made all the difference. I had learned the “don’t do thus and so,” but not the “why.” Of course, the thinking was, it must be good if you can’t. Family planning was definitely in that area. My feelings were like many others, “the Church isn’t just off-base, they aren’t even in the ballpark.” This couple said otherwise and they spoke from the heart in such a compelling way it was hard not to be interested.

After learning more about Natural Family Planning and struggling with it, I came to see that what the Church had to say was not only positive, but vital to the relationship I had with my wife. We not only decided to use NFP, but to teach it as well. It has been a blessing for me. To quote one male client, “I have been allowed into this fascinating world that is part of being a woman.” It doesn’t make me an expert, but it does tell me that a lot of men are in a darkness that they will probably never penetrate. Their lot is definitely a sadder world as a result.

“Fertility isn’t her problem, it’s our responsibility.”

Engaged and married couples deserve to know about NFP. They need to see the whole picture and the beauty that is there for them to take advantage of — yes, “advantage.” A couple that works and struggles with NFP is a couple who can talk, laugh, and be open to the grace of God in a way that society’s answer — the road well traveled — does not provide. Their intimacy will be greater and their pleasure more intense. Underneath all of the don’ts is a vision that even many in the Church have still not seen. It is only experience by a few who are brave enough to try it. There is little encouragement for them to even look. Not all couples are ready, but that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be exposed to it. They will remember. If you allow the chance, NFP will surprise you. MF

She Says...

Shortly after our marriage, my husband and I began using NFP for very pragmatic reasons: I didn’t like taking the Pill, and we couldn’t agree on another artificial method of family planning. We’ve continued, however, to use NFP for a whole different set of reasons.

I first began to perceive a difference between NFP and artificial birth control in the decision-making process. I realized that while taking the Pill (and I’d only taken it for two months), I had come to see a pregnancy as the worst possible thing that could happen. It wasn’t the ideal time to achieve a pregnancy, but I realized that my attitude was somewhat less than pro-life if I was seeing pregnancy as the worst that could happen. Choosing NFP meant accepting the implicit fertility involved in sexual intercourse as well as the understanding that no method of family planning gives complete control over fertility.

About four months after we began using NFP, I realized that I actually felt more confident using NFP to avoid pregnancy than I had while on the Pill. With NFP, I knew what was going on in my body. We were taking concrete responsibility for our fertility rather than giving over that responsibility to a drug or device and hoping it worked.

Through charting, I realized my body was understandable and orderly, not seething chaos. I came to see our fertility as a very precious gift and a positive facet of being a human person.

When we wanted to conceive, our shared understanding of our fertility enabled us to do more than just “hope” we would become pregnant. We could maximize the likelihood of becoming pregnant, and we could share the excitement of the pregnancy from the “are we or aren’t we stage” on. It was truly “our” pregnancy.

Learning to integrate periodic abstinence into our life together was not always easy — and it is still not easy. Self-discipline in any area of life can be a struggle, sometimes more than at other times. The fact that it is sometimes difficult doesn’t mean it is negative. On the contrary, through abstinence I have experienced my husband’s acceptance of me, of my body, without his seeing me as a sex object, and it has been tremendously affirming.

Until we began using NFP and saw that it worked, I really didn’t want to think about Catholic teaching in the areas of sexuality and conscience. Now, I am thankful that the Catholic Church continues to call us to see our sexuality and our sexual expression as having meaning.

In all areas of my life, in all facets of who I am, I am different than I would have been without NFP, and I say, “Vive la difference!” JMCL

Spirituality and NFP

Sometimes couples wonder how they can develop a shared spiritual life. NFP is one way. The sexual relationship is specific to marriage. In fact, intercourse is referred to in Church teachings as the “marital act,” but it must be integrated into the whole of the couple’s life as one source of grace in the couple’s marital spirituality. NFP enables couples to experience this truth and to appreciate Church teachings about sexuality, marriage, and family and to integrate these into their own lives. As John Paul II said in *Familiaris consortio*, “sexuality is respected and promoted in its truly and fully human dimension and is never ‘used’ as an ‘object.’ Breaking the personal unity of soul and body through contraception strikes at God’s creation itself.”

Sexual intercourse is a symbolic renewal of the marriage vows, when a couple makes a free, total gift of themselves. They are called to integrate their love for one another, their fertility and life-giving potential, and their family responsibilities in a way that respects Christian life.

A recent study found that NFP users:

- Have a dramatically low (0.2%) divorce rate;
- Experience happier marriage and are happier and more satisfied in their everyday lives;
- Have considerably more marital relations;
- Share a deeper intimacy and communication with their spouse than those who contracept.

If a couple wishes to avoid a pregnancy, they do so by abstaining during the fertile time, accepting the link between intercourse and conception. In a very real sense, the use of contraception is a refusal to accept one’s spouse in his or her totality. In accepting “couple fertility” through the use of NFP, one accepts the need to conform behavior to one’s intent regarding family size.

For intercourse to truly be a free gift of selves, a couple must be able to say “No” to intercourse. Acting out of uncontrollable desire or compulsion is not a free giving of self. Though abstinence can be difficult, as Christians we know self-control is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and we can depend on God’s faithfulness to provide us with the strength we need to do His will if we ask for it.

The element of struggle involved in following the Church’s teaching in this area does not mean the teaching is wrong. Decisions must be based on more than ease or convenience. Furthermore, several studies have found that couples who use NFP experience greater spiritual well-being and self-esteem than their contracepting peers. One husband commented, “It’s brought God into the picture. My relationship with God has gotten much closer.”

NFP is a tangible way to cultivate the ideals promised in the marriage vows. Using NFP is an acknowledgement of dependence on God’s ability and faithfulness to meet a couple’s need. It is an act of faith. NFP users recognize that many see their choice as foolish, but they realize the bottom line should be, “How will this choice help me deepen my commitment to and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ?” JMcL

It Takes Two To Tango

Human sexuality is never merely a matter of a man and woman coupling while hoping or not hoping to conceive a child. One’s masculinity or femininity is intertwined with sexual intercourse, along with the person’s need for physical closeness, one’s confidence in communicating with one’s body, one’s past experiences, and the spouse’s concern for a mutual experience. Sexual intimacy is an important and special part of marriage. But love and intimacy are much more.

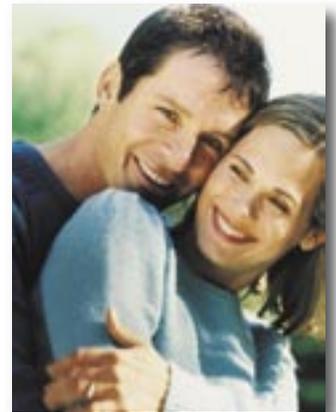
Intimacy is the way to express and share one’s “real self” with another person. Today, however, many people mistakenly believe intercourse is the only way to express interest and affection for another person. The forms of intimacy which fulfill the human need for love and belonging are many as you see with S*P*I*C*E:

- Spiritual — values, religious and moral convictions.
- Physical — playfulness, hugs, kisses, sexual intercourse.
- Intellectual — ideas, a sense of beauty.
- Commitment & communication—being together through good times and struggles. Sharing “who I am,” “how I feel,” and “what truly matters to me.”
- Emotional — Explore and appreciate each other’s feelings.

People can misuse sex, even in marriage. They may use sex to get something, or to pay back a favor, or as proof of their masculinity or femininity, or as a way to feel physically close, or to express power.

One reason some people find periodic abstinence difficult is that they unconsciously “short-circuit” other forms of intimacy by relying exclusively on intercourse. When couples experience sexual tension in a positive way, and learn to reach out to each other in non-genital ways, they cultivate another level of conjugal love. One husband reported, “NFP has challenged me to self-mastery so that I can freely give of myself.”

Data from the NWFS’ NFP survey revealed other benefits from NFP. The majority of couples using NFP share the responsibility of family planning. In addition, almost seventy percent of the couples believed the use of NFP had increased their communication level. Not surprisingly, a study found the divorce rate among NFP users was less than 1 percent. RF



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