Fertility Awareness-Based Method

also called Natural Family Planning Method (NFP)

Effectiveness: 91-99% with perfect use; 75% with typical use

Mechanism: Avoiding sex at the time surrounding ovulation. Ovulation is detected by use of physical signs, symptoms and menstrual cycle data. With NFP, couples abstain from intercourse during at-risk for ovulation days. Couples may use another method, such as barriers (condoms) or withdrawal, during the at-risk of ovulation time. Couples desiring a pregnancy may also use the NFP method to determine when they are ovulating to increase their chance of pregnancy during the at-risk of ovulation time.

Different techniques may be used to determine high-risk of ovulation days. Individuals or couples may choose to combine several techniques (symptothermal method) to increase the likelihood of determining the correct at-risk of ovulation days. Fertility awareness techniques include:

- **Standard Days Method**: This method follows a standard rule of what days during the menstrual cycle are the most fertile. If a woman’s cycle is 26-32 days long, the Standard Days method considers days 8-19 to be the most fertile days. To prevent pregnancy, a couple should avoid having intercourse or use a barrier method of birth control on these days. To promote pregnancy, a couple should try to have intercourse between day 8 and day 19, either every day or every other day. The Standard Days method works best if a woman’s cycle is regular and is consistently between 26 and 32 days long.

Several tools are available to assist an individual/couple in successfully using the Standard Days method for birth control or fertility. They include

  - **CycleBeads™**: Cycle beads are color-coated beads that identifies a fixed fertility window for women with regular menstrual cycles that are between 26 and 32 days. A user simply tracks the start date of her period and the other days of her cycle to now if she is on a day when pregnancy is possible. CycleBeads™ are available at your local health department.

  - **Smart Phone and Tablet Apps**: Many free apps are available for smart devices to help women identify a fixed fertility window. These apps utilize various notification methods such as texting or alerts to notify the user when they are most fertile. Search ‘fertility app’ on a device’s app store or search engine to download.

- **Calendar Method**: This method involves tracking the length of a woman’s menstrual cycle over several months to establish a pattern and determine which days of the month are fertile days. To utilize this method:

  - Before using the Calendar method, a woman needs to keep track of their menstrual cycles for at least six periods using a calendar or smart device app.

  - Mark the first day of menses (period) as day 1; then mark the first day of the next menses (period). Count the total number of days between the first days of each period. This is a cycle. A woman must chart at least six cycles to have an accurate account of average cycle length.

  - Using the shortest cycle in the six-month record, subtract 18 from the total number of days in that cycle. Count that number from day 1 of your current cycle. This is the first fertile day of the cycle. For example, if the shortest cycle recorded is 26 days long, subtract 18 from 26-you get eight. Then, count 8 days starting with day 1 of the period. This is the beginning of the fertile days of the cycle.

  - Next, using the longest cycle in the six-month record, subtract 11 from the total days in that cycle. Count that number from day 1 of your current cycle. This is the last fertile day of the cycle. For example, if the longest cycle recorded was 30 days long, subtract 11 from 30 and
you get 19. Then, count nineteen days starting with day 1 of the period. This is the end of the fertile days of the cycle.

- **Cervical Mucous Method:** This method involves recognizing changes in the mucous produced by the cervix (the opening to the uterus located in the vagina) and in how the mucous looks and feels. Just before ovulation, the amount of mucous made by the cervix noticeably increases, and the mucous becomes thin and slippery. Just after ovulation, the amount of mucous decreases, and it becomes thicker and less noticeable. Individuals or couples using the cervical mucous method need to be aware of any changes in the woman’s health or daily routine that could make reading the signs of ovulation difficult. Medications, feminine hygiene products, douching, sexual intercourse or having a pelvic exam in which lubrication is used all can change how the cervical mucous appears.

- **Two-Day Method:** This method is a variation of the cervical mucous method. With the two-day method, individuals or couples check the cervical mucous at least twice a day and then ask themselves two questions:
  - Did I notice any secretions today?
  - Did I notice any secretions yesterday?

If cervical mucous secretions were notice today or yesterday, it is most likely to be an at-risk of ovulation day. To prevent pregnancy, avoid sexual intercourse or use a barrier method, such as a condom, until secretions are not noticed. To promote pregnancy, have sexual intercourse every day or every other day when you notice secretions. If there is no cervical mucous today and yesterday (2 days in a row), it is probably not an at-risk for ovulation day. Pregnancy is less likely.

- **Basal Body Temperature Method:** The basal body temperature (BBT) is the body’s temperature when fully at rest. In most women, the body’s normal temperature increases slightly during ovulation (0.5-1° F) and remains elevated until the end of the menstrual cycle. The most fertile days are the 2-3 days before the increase in temperature. To monitor BBT, a woman should take her temperature every morning after waking up, before any activity, including before getting out of bed or having anything to eat or drink. Temperatures should be recorded daily to detect patterns of increase and decrease.

BBT by itself is not a good way to prevent or promote pregnancy. It shows only when ovulation has already occurred, not when it is going to occur. Also, it can be unreliable if a fever occurs due to sickness or other medical conditions.

- **Symptothermal Method:** A combination of methods. The two most commonly used are the BBT method and the cervical mucous method. Other methods or signs can be used, such as the Standard Days method.

**Advantages/Benefits:**
- May be used to plan a pregnancy as well as to avoid one
- Helps a woman learn more about her body
- Man is usually very involved
- No bad side effects
- Some religions and cultures approve of this method as the only acceptable form of contraception

**Disadvantages/Risks:**
- High failure rate
- Requires much discipline and effort, by both the man and woman, and especially by the woman. Both must be highly motivated.
- May be required to take body temperature daily
- Does not prevent risks of sexually transmitted diseases or HIV/AIDS

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- Not as effective when the woman is sick or when she is on some medicines
- Not a good choice for the woman whose periods are irregular; if her temperature pattern is different each month; or if she just stopped taking birth control pills; or just started having periods or is close to menopause; or she cannot keep a calendar chart or if she and/or partner objects to going without sex for at least two weeks of the month.
- Requires abstinence or a barrier method at time of ovulation, which is also the time of high sex drive
- Requires several months of data analysis and collection

Resources: