

Natural family planning

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“Natural family planning” and “fertility awareness” are terms used for family planning methods that do not use hormones, chemicals, or barriers to avoid or achieve pregnancy. These methods teach you how to track normal monthly changes in your body that can tell you whether you are likely to get pregnant on a given day.

By learning a natural family planning method and carefully tracking your body’s monthly changes, you can know when to avoid sex to prevent pregnancy or you can know when to have sex if you want to get pregnant.

“Rhythm Method” or “Calendar Method”

In the late 1920s, scientists found a method that they thought would work for most women. This method asks women who have regular periods to keep track of the number of days between each period. This number is used to figure out which days you are likely to get pregnant if you have sex. The more months you track, the more accurate this method becomes. If you keep a record of how many days between each period for only 3 months, the method is only 64% effective. If you track your periods for 12 months or more, the method is 90% effective. Today, there are more ways to know when you are most likely to get pregnant and several methods of natural family planning that you can use.

Advantages of natural family planning

There are many reasons that you might choose to use natural methods of family planning:

- There are no side effects
- You can stop anytime
- There is no need to rely on a health care provider for birth control

- Working together on natural family planning may bring you and your partner closer
- Natural family planning is accepted by all religions

Disadvantages of natural family planning

- Natural family planning methods do not protect you against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or HIV
- If you are trying to avoid pregnancy, these methods require that you do not have sex for several days

With perfect use, between 2 and 5 out of every 100 women per year will get pregnant using one of the natural family planning methods described here. You have to carefully keep track of regular body changes over several months. You are more likely to have success with natural family planning if you are comfortable touching your body and you have a partner who also wants to use natural family planning. Stress, lifestyle, smoking, and health will all affect the monthly changes in your body.

How does natural family planning work

During every menstrual cycle, a woman’s body changes daily. Signs of these changes can be seen, felt, and measured. The signs used by most natural family planning methods are:

- The feel, shape, and position of the cervix
- The texture, color, and amount of mucus in the vagina
- Body temperature
- Feeling of heaviness and breast tenderness, as well as abdominal pain

For example, on days when you are less likely to get pregnant, the cervix hangs low in the vagina and feels firm (like the tip of your nose). On days when you are more likely to get pregnant, the cervix is higher in the vagina and feels softer (more like the flesh on your chin).

If you are breastfeeding, have irregular periods, have just stopped using birth control pills, or if you don't have periods, please discuss the use of natural family planning with your health provider before using any of these methods.

(For health care professionals to share with clients. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition you should consult your health care provider.)