

Natural family planning

Natural family planning is a way of helping you avoid pregnancy by becoming aware of your fertility. Fertility awareness involves identifying fertility indicators (the signs and symptoms of fertility) during your menstrual cycle so you can plan or avoid pregnancy.

The menstrual cycle is the time from the first day of your period to the day before your next period starts. The average length of the menstrual cycle is around 28 days, although many women have longer or shorter cycles and this is normal.

Effectiveness

Natural family planning is most effective at preventing pregnancy when taught by a specialist teacher, and when more than one fertility indicator is used.

- Perfect use: If always used according to teaching and instructions natural family planning methods are up to 99 per cent effective, depending on which methods are used. This means that at least one woman in 100 will get pregnant in a year.
- Typical use: If natural family planning methods are not always used according to teaching and instructions, about 24 in 100 women will get pregnant in a year.

Who can use it?

- Most women can use natural family planning as long as they receive good instructions and support and are able to keep regular daily records.
- It may not be a suitable method for women who do not have periods.
- It may take longer to recognise your fertility indicators and to start to use natural family planning if you have irregular menstrual cycles, after stopping hormonal contraception, after having a baby, during breastfeeding, after an abortion or miscarriage, or when approaching the menopause.

How it works

Natural family planning works by observing and recording your body's different natural signs or fertility indicators on each day of your menstrual cycle. Changes in these indicators can help you to identify your fertile time.

The main fertility indicators are:

- your body temperature
- cervical secretions (cervical mucus).

You can also monitor the length of your menstrual cycle to help you work out the start and end of your fertile time but cycle length should not be used on its own as a fertility indicator.

The fertile time lasts for around 8–9 days of each menstrual cycle. This is because the egg lives for up to 24 hours. Occasionally, more than one egg is released at ovulation (within 24 hours of the first egg being released) and sperm can live inside a woman's body for up to seven days. This means that if you have sex as much as seven days before ovulation you may get pregnant.

Advantages

- No physical side-effects.
- Suitable for women who can't use hormonal methods.
- Greater awareness of your body and fertility.
- Can be used to plan a pregnancy as well as avoid pregnancy.
- Can help you to communicate about your fertility and sexuality.

Disadvantages

- Need to avoid sex or use male or female condoms at fertile times of the cycle.
- Needs to be taught and takes 3–6 menstrual cycles to learn effectively.
- You have to keep daily records.
- Some events, such as illness, lifestyle, stress or travel, may make fertility indicators harder to monitor or interpret.

Risks

There are no serious risks or side effects.

Periods and fertility

It does not affect your periods or fertility.

Devices, apps and online charts

- Persona is a small handheld computerised monitor with urine test sticks, which measure hormonal changes. It predicts the fertile and infertile times of the menstrual cycle. If used correctly it can be 94 per cent effective.
- There are many apps and online charting systems available. These products vary in their approach and their reliability and effectiveness is currently unknown.

Other things to know

- General practice and contraception clinics do not often teach natural family planning so you may need to find your own teacher – some charge a fee. You can get further information from Fertility UK at www.fertilityuk.org

For lots more information about natural family planning go to www.fpa.org.uk/nfp

All methods of contraception come with a Patient Information Leaflet which provides detailed information about the method.

This is general information based on evidence-guided research from the World Health Organisation and The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare.

Remember - contact your doctor, practice nurse or a sexual health clinic if you are worried or unsure about anything.

Useful information

- Get information about contraception and sexual health at www.fpa.org.uk
- Get information for young people under 25 at www.brook.org.uk
- Find your closest contraception or sexual health clinic at www.fpa.org.uk/clinics
- Find a GP or pharmacy at www.nhs.uk (England), www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk (Wales), www.nhs24.com (Scotland) and www.hscni.net (Northern Ireland).

Emergency contraception

If you have had sex without contraception, or think your method might have failed there are different types of emergency contraception you can use.

An emergency contraceptive pill containing levonorgestrel – can be taken up to three days (72 hours) after sex. More effective the earlier it is taken after sex. Available with a prescription or to buy from a pharmacy. There are different brands but they all work the same way.

An emergency contraceptive pill containing ulipristal acetate – can be taken up to five days (120 hours) after sex. Available with a prescription or to buy from a pharmacy. EllaOne is the only brand in the UK.

An IUD – can be fitted up to five days after sex, or up to five days after the earliest time you could have released an egg (ovulation).

Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about getting emergency pills in advance, just in case you need them.

Sexually transmitted infections

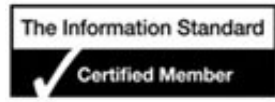
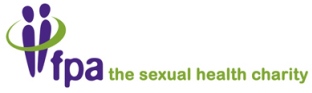
Most methods of contraception do not protect you from sexually transmitted infections.

Male and female condoms, when used correctly and consistently, can help protect against sexually transmitted infections. If you can, avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called Nonoxinol 9, which does not protect against HIV and may even increase the risk of infection.

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More information about natural family planning at www.fpa.org.uk/nfp

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