Birth Control: Natural Family Planning

Birth control can be used when you do not want to get pregnant. Natural family planning is birth control without the use of chemicals (vaginal spermicide or oral contraceptives) or barriers (condoms or diaphragms). Natural family planning is a way of finding out which days each month you are most likely to get pregnant and not having sex during that time.

How does natural family planning work?
You track which days of the month you are most likely to get pregnant and do not have sex during that time. There are three different ways to figure out when you are most likely to get pregnant. You can:

• Check your body temperature
• Check your vaginal discharge
• Keep a calendar of your menstrual periods

All of these ways can help predict when you are most likely to release an egg (ovulate) and get pregnant. Using a combination of all three ways increases your chance of preventing pregnancy.

How well does natural family planning work?
Natural family planning, when used correctly, is about 75% effective. This means there are about 25 pregnancies a year for every 100 women using this type of birth control.

Some women choose natural family planning because there are no religious objections to this method. It also helps you learn about your menstrual cycle.

What do I need to do?
You will need to keep careful records about your cycle for at least 4 months before relying on natural family planning to prevent pregnancy. This will best help you figure out when you should not have sex. Following the instructions exactly increases your chances of this method working.

Check Body Temperature:
• Take your temperature every morning before getting out of bed. You may use a regular digital thermometer.
• When there is a small drop in your temperature, the release of the egg from the ovary (ovulation) has started. This begins the time when you are most likely to get pregnant.
• This drop in temperature will be followed by a slight rise in temperature over a day or two.
• You must not have sex from the 4th day of your cycle (day 1 is the first day of your last period) until your temperature has increased for 3 days in a row.
Check Vaginal Discharge

• During your reproductive cycle, there are changes in your vaginal drainage (mucous). Normally the drainage is cloudy. When it becomes more clear and slippery, ovulation has occurred.

• Do not have sex from day 4 of your cycle until 4 days after the final day of clear, slippery vaginal drainage.

Keeping a Calendar of Your Menstrual Periods

• Record the length of your menstrual periods for 12 months. Put a mark on your calendar the day that your menstrual period starts every month.

• At the end of the year, count the number of days from one mark to the next mark. This gives you the length of your menstrual (reproductive) cycle each month.

• The average menstrual cycle is 28 days. Once you have recorded these numbers, subtract 19 from the shortest cycle and 10 from the longest cycle. Do not have sex during those days of your cycle.

• For example:
  
  If your shortest cycle was 23 days, subtract 19 from 23, which is 4.
  
  If your longest cycle was 34 days, subtract 10 from 34, which is 24.

  In this example, the time you are most likely to get pregnant is between the 4th and 24th days of every cycle. You should not have sex during those days. You should also not have sex for 2 to 3 days before and after those days to be safe. Remember, you must keep track of your menstrual periods for one year before you can calculate your unsafe time using the calendar.

Are there problems with natural family planning?

• It is difficult to use natural family planning if your menstrual periods do not happen at the same time each month.

• This method requires couples to not have sex for a large number of days each month.

• Stress and illness can change the length of a woman's menstrual cycle, and this can make natural family planning less likely to prevent pregnancy.

• This method requires a lot of work and discipline for both partners in a relationship.