Natural family planning methods help women and couples determine when sexual intercourse can and cannot result in pregnancy. A woman's body goes through changes during the menstrual cycle. By learning about these changes and tracking them, couples can know when to have and when to avoid intercourse depending upon whether they are trying to become pregnant or avoid pregnancy.

Planning pregnancies is important for the health and safety of both mother and baby. Pregnancies spaced closer than 2 years apart increase the risk for premature birth and infant mortality. A woman may also have other health issues that make pregnancy less safe at times.

During each menstrual cycle, one of the woman's ovaries releases an egg. This is called ovulation. The egg moves toward the uterus or womb through the fallopian tube. It is in the tube where the egg may be fertilized by sperm. If it is not, it leaves the body during the menstrual period.

A woman is most likely to conceive or become pregnant if sexual intercourse occurs before she ovulates to just after she ovulates. Since sperm can live up to a week inside a woman's body, intercourse needs to be avoided for 5 days before, the day of and 3 days after ovulation if pregnancy is not planned for that month.

There are different methods of natural family planning that focus on detecting physical changes during the menstrual cycle.
Cervical Mucus Method
With this method you are paying attention to the color and thickness of your cervical mucus (discharge from the vagina).

- Just after your period, there are a few "dry days" with little to no mucus. These are days when you are less fertile.
- As an egg gets ready to be released, more mucus is produced. This mucus looks cloudy or whitish and feels sticky. These are fertile days when you are likely to conceive.
- The most fertile days occur just before ovulation when the most mucus is produced. On these days, the mucus is clear and slippery like raw egg whites.
- After 3 or 4 slippery days, any mucus you may see is usually cloudy. This is followed by a few dry days before your period starts again.

Each time you use the bathroom, notice how you feel and check to see if there is mucus on the tissue as you wipe. Each evening chart how it looks and feels:

- Dry
- Sticky/cloudy
- Slippery/clear

The dry days are when you are least likely to become pregnant. An easy way to think of this is, "If you're dry, the sperm will die. If you're wet, a baby you may get."

Basal Body Temperature Method
Basal body temperature is the body's "at-rest" temperature when you first wake up. When the egg is released, the body's temperature goes up a little – usually less than a degree. Since this can be hard to detect, a basal thermometer needs to be used.

Steps
1. Purchase a basal thermometer from a drugstore. A basal body temperature chart is also helpful.
2. Take and record your temperature every day for a few months.
3. Make note of when your temperature rises each month.
4. Check to see if this occurs on the same day or close to the same day in your cycle. If so, you may be able to predict your fertile days of your cycle.

You are most fertile 2 to 3 days before your temperature rises with the release of the egg. After your temperature has been higher for 3 days, you are less likely to conceive.

Many women have variable menstrual cycles, which can be challenging. Natural family planning can be most effective if you are taught by a specialized instructor. It also requires that couples are motivated, consistent and disciplined.

Other Resources
If you decide to use natural family planning methods, you will likely need to learn more. These resources offer detailed instructions and support:

Family of the Americas
The Ovulation Method
www.familyplanning.net/en/ovulation
1-800-443-3395

FEMM
(Fertility Education & Medical Management)
www.femmhealth.org
614-360-995

Couple to Couple League
www.ccli.org
1-800-745-8252

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