



NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

Myths & Reality

*Helping couples to **deepen** conjugal love and achieve **responsible parenthood** is part of the Church's total pastoral ministry to Catholic spouses. Fulfillment of this ministry includes both **education** and **pastoral care**. This means "instilling conviction and offering practical help to those who wish to live out their parenthood in a truly responsible way" (Familiaris consortio, 35).*



Myth #1: NFP is just another name for Rhythm.

REALITY: Natural Family Planning (NFP) is an umbrella term for modern, healthy, scientifically accurate, and reliable methods of family planning.

It differs from “Rhythm” (or the Calendar Method). Rhythm tried to estimate the time of next ovulation by calculating previous menstrual cycles. Although this approach had sound scientific underpinnings, in practice it often proved inaccurate because of the unique nature of each woman’s menstrual cycle. NFP, by contrast, has been proven scientifically sound in both theory and practice.

NFP is based on scientific research about women’s cycles of fertility. Since the 19th century, doctors have known about the changes in cervical mucus and its relation to fertility. In the 1920s, temperature rules were developed. However, it wasn’t until the 1950s that an educational process was developed to teach the observation and interpretation of these fertility signs.

Myth #2: NFP can only be used by women with regular cycles.

REALITY: The natural methods do not depend on having regular menstrual cycles; they treat each woman and each cycle as unique.

NFP works with menstrual cycles of any length and any degree of irregularity. It can be used during breastfeeding, just before menopause, and in other special circumstances. NFP allows a woman to understand the physical signals her body gives her to tell her when she is most likely to become pregnant.

The natural methods can be used throughout a woman’s reproductive life. These methods are progressive. That is, they monitor the current, day-to-day signs of the woman’s cycle. Instruction in NFP provides couples with information about their bodies that is specific and observable.

When special circumstances do occur, a woman can contact an NFP instructor for additional guidance in interpreting her signs of fertility.

Myth #3: NFP is not a reliable method of family planning.

REALITY: When couples understand the methods and are motivated to follow them, NFP is up to 99% successful in spacing or limiting births.

The effectiveness of NFP depends upon spouses’ following the rules of the method according to their family planning intention (i.e., achieving or limiting pregnancy). Those who are strongly motivated to avoid pregnancy and follow the method-defined rules are very effective in meeting their goal.

Effectiveness of Natural Family Planning in Avoiding Pregnancy (Number of pregnancies among 100 couples in one year.)

- Couples who carefully follow all the rules for avoiding pregnancy all the time – 1 to 3 pregnancies per 100 couples
- Couples who do not follow all the rules for avoiding pregnancy all the time – 2 to 15 pregnancies per 100

If wishing to avoid pregnancy, a couple practicing NFP is usually advised to abstain from intercourse and genital contact during the wife’s fertile time.

The NFP methods are: the Basal Body Temperature method, which monitors changes in a woman's temperature when she wakes up each morning; the Billings Ovulation Method, which monitors changes in a woman's cervical mucus; and the Sympto-Thermal Method, which combines observations of temperature and cervical mucus with other indicators such as changes in the cervix and secondary fertility signs.

Myth #4: NFP does not allow for sexual "spontaneity." This information sheet may be freely downloaded, copied or distributed.

REALITY: This depends upon what one means by "spontaneity."

If by sexual spontaneity one means loving gestures, caresses, kisses, loving words, etc., then NFP does not hinder spontaneity. In fact NFP encourages couples to explore ways to express their love to one another because sexual intercourse is not always available. And the spontaneity with which a couple unites in lovemaking each cycle is something NFP couples find to be very special.

If by "spontaneity" one means only being able to engage in sexual intercourse whenever the desire arises, then NFP does not measure up. But then, respect for your spouse--whose desires may not always be exactly the same as yours at any moment--is also in tension with that kind of "spontaneity."

Any limitation on "spontaneity" in NFP should be judged in light of the freedom couples gain by not using chemical or barrier methods of contraception. Remember, chemical contraceptives carry heavy baggage in terms of contraindications and side effects.

Myth #5: The Catholic Church wants people to have as many babies as possible.

REALITY: In fact the Church encourages people to be "responsible" stewards over their fertility.

In this view of "responsible parenthood" married couples carefully weigh their responsibilities to God, each other, the children they already have, and the world in which they live when making decisions about the number and spacing of children.

Responsible parenthood is lived out within the structures which God has established in human nature. The nature of sexual intercourse, which is both life-giving (pro-creative) and love-giving (unitive), reflects a Divine plan. That is why the Church teaches that couples must not actively intervene to separate their fertility from their bodily union. To do so is to show disrespect for an important gift of the Creator.

Myth #6: There is no difference between NFP and artificial methods of contraception.

REALITY: NFP methods are different from and better than artificial contraception because they:

- Cooperate with, rather than suppress, a couple's fertility
- Can be used both to achieve and avoid pregnancy
- Call for shared responsibility and cooperation by husband and wife
- Require spousal communication
- Foster respect for and acceptance of the total person
- Have no harmful side effects
- Are virtually cost free

NFP is unique because it enables its users to work with the body rather than against it. Fertility is viewed as a reality to live, not a problem to be solved.

Myth #7: The Church does not want couples to have sex for pleasure's sake.

REALITY: The Church wants married couples to have the best sex possible!

Remember, there is a difference between simply “having sex,” which includes actions directed towards the self, and “making love,” which requires the giving of self to the other. Only in a lifelong, committed, loving relationship, centered in Christ, can couples hope to fully experience the sacrament of life and love, i.e., marriage.

Current studies confirm what the Church has always taught: married sex is more fulfilling and enjoyable than uncommitted sex. People who “use” sex only for their own pleasure end up using other people--and they lose the real joy of sexuality. Unconditional love is what marriage is all about. That love is a real source of joy in the lives of married couples!

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