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THE HOW AND WHY OF NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

Couples who choose natural methods of family planning often speak of increased intimacy and communication—and a new personal relationship with God. *by Mary Shivanandan*



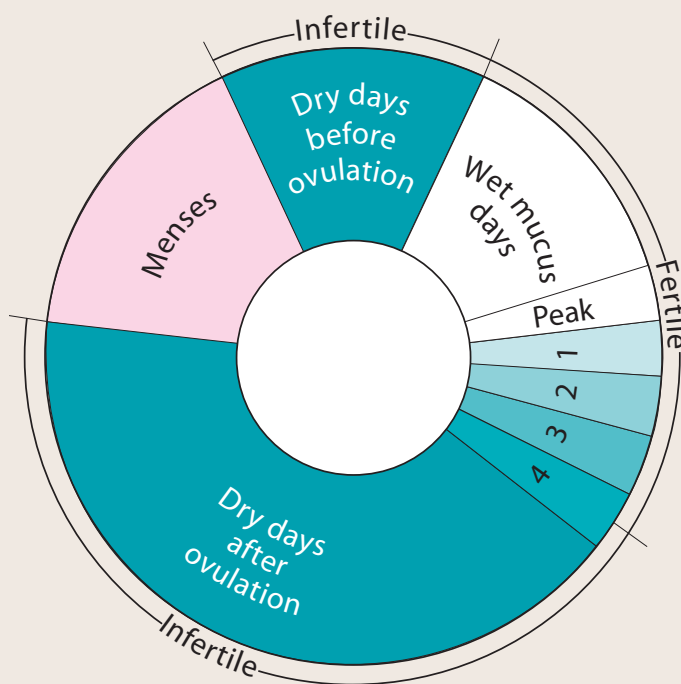
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What is natural family planning? In the broadest sense, it refers to methods of avoiding (or achieving) pregnancy that cooperate with a couple's fertility rather than suppress it through the use of drugs or contraceptive devices. These methods involve determining the woman's fertile period and abstaining from intercourse during that time to avoid pregnancy, or having intercourse then to achieve pregnancy. Because they take advantage of the body's natural rhythms of fertility and infertility and place no positive obstacles to the transmission of life, they do not fall under the Catholic Church's official ban against artificial contraception. The assumption is, of course, that even when couples are using natural methods, they are not using them to avoid conception for selfish motives but for sound reasons like physical or emotional health or economic circumstances.

THE PROCESS

Natural family planning carefully observes the signs and symptoms of fertile and infertile periods. Each month, several eggs (ova) begin to ripen in the ovary. As this occurs, the hormone estrogen is released. Among other effects, estrogen stimulates the secretion of a certain type of mucus from the cervix, which joins the uterus to the vagina. Usually the vagina is dry and hostile to sperm, which cannot survive more than a few hours in that environment or pass through the cervix into the uterus. When this mucus flows (wet mucus days), it protects the sperm cells and facilitates their movement. It nourishes them in the cervical crypts and provides channels for them to swim up through the uterus to the fallopian tube to fertilize the egg that has reached maturity. In a regular cycle, this mucus flows for about three to five days, and, as ovulation approaches, its consistency becomes like that of raw egg white



and can be stretched between finger and thumb.

Once the egg is released, the *corpus luteum* or yellow body, which encased the ripening egg, begins to release another hormone, progesterone. Progesterone not only inhibits any further ovulation but also changes the character of the mucus so that it no longer protects or provides channels for the sperm. Also, body temperature rises, signaling the decline of the fertile period and providing an "incubator" for a fertilized egg. Chances of conception decrease rapidly in the three days after ovulation. If the egg is not fertilized, the lining of the uterus built up by estrogen and progesterone as nourishment for new life is shed in menstruation (menses) about two weeks later (normal range is ten to sixteen days).

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