

Fact or Fiction? The Truth About NFP

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No doubt you've heard the criticisms that skeptics launch at natural family planning methods.

"What do you call couples who use NFP? PARENTS!"

"NFP is nothing more than the rhythm method."

"NFP won't work with my cycles."

Let's take a closer look at these common misconceptions about natural fertility awareness.

Fiction: *Natural family planning doesn't work.*

Fact: Critics of NFP often charge supporters with exaggerating the effectiveness of using natural methods of fertility awareness to avoid pregnancy. They cite the larger-than-average size of Catholic families as evidence that NFP is either too hard to use or just plain ineffective.

Certainly, all methods of natural fertility awareness are different; and using natural family planning to avoid pregnancy does require couples to follow the necessary rules and abstain during fertile times. However, when used correctly, the three most well-

known methods of natural fertility awareness all report levels of method effectiveness that are as high, or higher, than contraceptive pills and devices. The Couple to Couple League's Sympto-Thermal Method of NFP touts

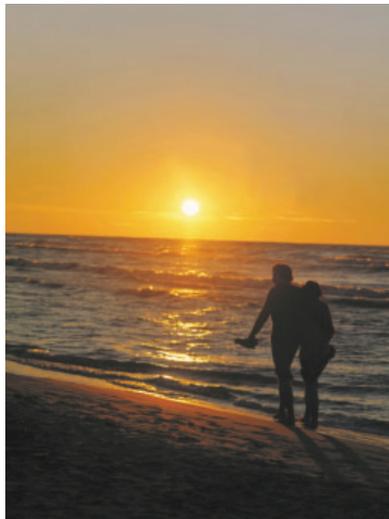
a 99 percent level of effectiveness in avoiding pregnancy. The Billings Ovulation Method cites a 99.5 percent effectiveness rate, and the Creighton Model FertilityCare System reports a method effectiveness range of 98.7-99.8 percent.

Yes, the effectiveness of NFP decreases when users misunderstand or

ignore the rules of the method, just as the effectiveness of other methods decreases when not used properly or consistently. Yet numerous studies show that natural methods of fertility awareness can be used quite successfully by well-instructed couples to postpone or avoid conception.

Fiction: *NFP is just the rhythm method.*

Fact: When using the old rhythm method, women used a calendar to predict days of fertility and infertility



based on the “statistically average” cycle length of 28 days. Modern methods of NFP are linked much more closely to a woman’s individual biological signs of fertility and infertility. Women observe and chart up to three basic indicators: temperature, mucus, and cervix. Sympto-thermal methods involve a cross check of two or three signs, while mucus-only methods rely on a thorough analysis of the sensation and characteristics of cervical mucus. Because these modern methods rely on actual observations of a woman’s bodily signs in her current cycle, they are much more reliable in identifying phases of fertility and infertility than the rhythm method was.

Fiction: *NFP is just Catholic birth control.*

Fact: In an article at his website, Chastity.com, speaker and author Jason Evert uses the analogy of a diet versus bulimia to explain the difference between contraception and NFP. A woman who goes on a diet to lose weight exercises self control. A woman who binges and purges succumbs to unnatural and unhealthy behavior to lose weight.

Similarly, couples who use NFP to avoid pregnancy accept God’s design and are simply choosing to exercise self control and abstain from marital relations during times of fertility. Couples who contracept exclude God’s

plan and deliberately subvert the natural functioning of the human body.

The Catholic approach to natural fertility awareness involves constant discernment of God’s will regarding family size. *Humanae Vitae* acknowledges that couples with “serious reasons” may decide not to have children for “either a certain or indefinite period of time” and calls couples to be both prudent and generous in deciding to add to their families.

Fiction: *NFP only works if you have perfectly regular cycles.*

Fact: NFP can actually work just as well for women with irregular cycles because it relies on observing current individual fertility signs. When faced with an unusually long or short cycle, women still “read” the biological signs their body is giving them, just as is done

in regular cycles. Although the rules may change during times such as postpartum or premenopause, methods of natural fertility awareness can also be used during these times of changing fertility. NFP teachers can give advanced guidelines for couples experiencing these times of transition.

Additionally, NFP can be used to identify causes of various cycle irregularities. NFP-only physicians can use charting data to diagnose nutritional or hormonal imbalances,

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thyroid dysfunction, and other reproductive problems and challenges. For this reason, many couples learn NFP in order to achieve pregnancy. Observing biological signs can help couples determine the best window of fertility and increase their chances of conception.

Contrary to the claims made by its critics, NFP can be used successfully to achieve or avoid pregnancy in a variety of situations, it enhances

marriages, and it respects God's design for human love. You may not be able to silence every critic; but living your commitment to NFP with joy and patience may make a lasting impression on the skeptics around you.

Anne McClure is a mom, writer, and educator who can be found at: <http://aemwriting.com>.

Natural Family Planning Awareness Week runs from July 25-31, 2010. With this national educational campaign, the USCCB spreads awareness of the benefits of natural fertility awareness, marks the anniversary of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (July 25) and highlights the feast of Saints Joachim and Anne (July 26).

Looking for more information about NFP?

- USCCB Natural Family Planning page: <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index.shtml>
- Couple to Couple League International: <http://www.ccli.org/>
- Creighton Model FertilityCare System: <http://www.creightonmodel.com/>
- Billings Ovulation Method of Natural Family Planning: <http://www.boma-usa.org/>
- Family of the Americas method: <http://www.familyplanning.net/index/index>
- USCCB novena to Saints Anne and Joachim, patrons of married couples, expectant mothers, and couples who are having difficulty conceiving: <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/nfpweek/Novena.pdf>
- Full text of *Humanae Vitae*: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html
- For programs and classes within your diocese, visit your diocesan family life web page.