



Natural Birth Control and Fertility Awareness

Women have rarely been offered the option of an effective, natural means of birth control. Fertility awareness allows women and their partners to achieve or avoid pregnancy. It eliminates the harmful effects of some artificial contraceptive methods such as birth control pills and IUDs. Statistics available after 25 years of research show effectiveness as high as 99% in preventing pregnancy. If used alone, fertility awareness is most successful when a woman has a regular cycle and a committed partner. However, for women with irregular cycles it can be used in conjunction with the diaphragm, cervical cap, condom or foam. Fertility awareness is equally empowering for postpartum or menopausal women.

How does it work?

Fertility awareness involves being able to read certain signs that our bodies give us to let us know if and when we are fertile. There are many signs which signal fertility such as position of the cervix, certain body sensations during ovulation, and certain emotional feelings. We will examine two easily measurable signs that a woman and her partner can track cervical mucus and basal body temperature.

Cervical Mucus

Fertile mucus: This is wet, clear, very stretchy (like uncooked egg white), or creamy. It usually lasts for a few hours to a few days. Thus mucus occurs mid-cycle, which for a woman with a 28-day cycle is about 14 days before onset of the next menstruation. During the presence of fertile mucus, you may notice a sensation of wetness or notice the mucus when you wipe after going to the bathroom. If you take some of the mucus between your index finger and thumb, you can stretch it into a long, thin strand. This mucus was perfectly designed to be slippery and stretchy so sperm can swim along it up through the cervical os to the uterus. If there is an egg present, fertilization can occur.

Absence of mucus: Following menstruation, there is usually a sensation or a feeling of dryness around the outside of the vagina when the vaginal opening is tested with the fingertips. The number of days of dryness will vary with the length of the cycle.

Pre-ovulation mucus: after the dry days, as estrogen levels start to increase from the developing ovarian follicles, mucus starts to be detectable. Collect the mucus with your fingertips between vaginal folds. The mucus may be yellow, white or cloudy in color and tacky, sticky, or clumpy in consistency. It takes only a few cycles of practice to recognize cervical mucus from vaginal secretion, semen or spermicide. On the average there are roughly five days between the beginning of mucus and ovulation, but this varies.

Ovulation: This usually occurs within 24 hours of the last day of the fertile mucus. This depends on the rise and fall of the hormones, like the rest of the events of the menstrual cycle.

Post-ovulation mucus: This is similar to pre-ovulation mucus. It is thick, whitish, and lumpy in appearance and texture. It is in response to the rise in progesterone and the fall in estrogen. If viewed under a microscope this mucus resembles a spider web! It is designed to trap sperm and prevent them from going anywhere.

Menstruation: Menstruation occurs 10-16 days after the fertile mucus and is the result of low levels of both estrogen and progesterone.

It makes sense that the best time to get pregnant is right around the time of the fertile mucus. Using the same line of thinking, this is not a good time for intercourse if you do not wish to get pregnant. The best time for intercourse if you want to prevent pregnancy is during, before, or just after menstruation. Safe times occur on the evening following a dry day without signs of mucus. It is possible to have fertile mucus even when you have vaginal bleeding. Usually this bleeding occurs on days between your normal menses. To detect if any mucus is fertile, look at the toilet paper after you urinate. Blood will sink into the paper but mucus will be detectable on top of the paper. It could be clumpy or stringy depending upon how close it is to ovulation. It is a good rule of thumb to avoid intercourse whenever mucus is present before ovulation. It is also wise to avoid intercourse if the presence of semen, spermicide, or bleeding prevents you from assessing the mucus accurately. If intercourse is desired during this time, a backup method should be used.

Basal Body Temperature

To use basal body temperatures as an indication of ovulation, a special thermometer that is calibrated from 96° to 100° is used. This may be obtained at any pharmacy. The temperature is taken every morning upon waking and before rising. The thermometer must be shaken down the night before so that there is no movement in the morning when the temperature is taken. The temperature needs to be taken about the same time each morning and from the same orifice. You may take it orally, under your arm, or in your vagina. Illness, alcohol, lack of sleep, and fever are some of the factors that can affect your temperature. During ovulation there is a drop in temperature of half a degree, followed by a rise of approximately one degree that remains high until the next menses. Charting your basal body temperature over a period of consecutive months and studying the resultant curves will reveal an understanding of your menstrual cycle and the peak times of fertility. Used in combination with charting cervical mucus, it becomes an even more reliable and informative tool.

Summary

Several excellent books as well as self-help groups are available which offer information, support, and training in fertility awareness. The classes and books have charts with examples to help you learn as you go along. I recommend further training, which includes charting for several months, before relying on this as your sole method of birth control.

Involving your partner is key to making this a successful method of birth control or fertility planning. You and your partner can more effectively support each other around choices concerning all aspects of your sexuality, as well as pregnancy. The potential benefits of using this method are numerous, and include a greatly enriched sexual relationship with your partner and an increased awareness of the fascinating, natural way in which your body works. If you are interested in learning more about fertility awareness, please schedule an appointment with me today! Call 360-357-1470.

