

Fertility Awareness

Fertility awareness means observing different characteristics of a woman's menstrual cycle to understand when she is ovulating or when she will likely start her period. Some women use this information to help to plan a pregnancy; others just like to have a greater understanding of how their body works. Some women use this information to prevent pregnancy.

Fertility Awareness for Birth Control:

Using fertility awareness for preventing pregnancy is complex. It requires a *sophisticated understanding of how it works* and of the *circumstances* that can affect *how well* it works.

Please use the contact information at the end of these sheets to *find out more about fertility awareness and whether or not it can work for you.*

Fertility awareness may be an alternative to other birth control methods. It requires proper instruction to be used correctly. Most women are aware that they are more likely to become pregnant during a certain time of the menstrual cycle, but few know how to calculate that time accurately.

There are **three parts** to fertility awareness

1. **Calendar Method:** The length of past menstrual cycles predicts the fertile period.
2. **Temperature Method:** Daily temperature recordings detect ovulation.
3. **Cervical Mucus Method:** Changes in cervical mucus show signs of ovulation.

How it works:

Pregnancy is prevented by not having vaginal intercourse during the fertile time of the cycle. Calculation of this time is based on the events of the menstrual cycle and on sperm survival. To use this method you must take into account that:

- The ovum, or egg, can live for 24 hours after ovulation.
- Sperm usually live for about 3 days and sometimes up to 5 days in the woman's body.
- The time from the start of menstrual bleeding until ovulation varies from 6 to 24 days or more.
- Ovulation occurs about 14 days before the start of the next menstrual period.
- Progesterone released by the ovary after ovulation causes a slight rise in body temperature until the next menstrual period.
- Mucus produced by the cervix is scant, thick and milky when a woman is not fertile. It is abundant, thin and clear when she is fertile.
- Since the exact time of ovulation cannot be predicted, 2 to 3 days are added to both the beginning and the end of the fertile or "unsafe" time.

Effectiveness:

Effectiveness varies greatly depending upon a number of things.

- It may take several years from menarche (the onset of menstruation) until a young woman has regular cycles.
 - Some women never have regular cycles.
 - Stress or illness can alter cycles.
- Using fertility awareness methods requires commitment to following all of the rules that apply.

A second method such as a condom can be used during the “safe” days to increase effectiveness. Using a barrier method such as a condom during “unsafe days” means relying only on the condom (or whichever barrier method was chosen). Using two methods together increases effectiveness (i.e. condom and foam, or condom and diaphragm). Fertility awareness methods require the user to have adequate training from a reliable source.

Fertility awareness methods mean limiting vaginal intercourse to the “safe” times. Other sexual activities could be engaged in, so long as semen is not deposited in or near the vagina.

A recent study by the University of Saskatchewan suggests that some women may ovulate more than once in a cycle (Pierson et al 2003). This information would mean that for some women, fertility would be more complicated to predict, and the methods used in fertility awareness may not be effective for them to prevent pregnancy.

Adapted from: Birth Control Handbook Millennium Edition, Montreal Health Press, 2000.

For information on fertility awareness instructional programs, contact **Serena Manitoba:**

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