



Introduction to Natural Family Planning

All couples preparing for marriage, whether engaged or convalidating, are required to take a full natural family course taught by a certified instructor. A full course has an introductory class with at least 3-4 follow-up sessions conducted by a certified instructor.

Timing

For most couples this course will take a minimum of 8 weeks to complete, including an introductory session, individual charting of the woman's cycle, and private instruction that takes place during the eight weeks.

**Please note that in some cases it may take longer for a couple to complete the NFP course, and so it is very important to get started on this step as soon as possible to complete it in time for your wedding.*

Dispensations

In certain circumstances, especially for convalidation couples, consideration of the unique history of the couple (age and length of union) is important to determine if a dispensation from the requirement of the full course is appropriate. Exceptions/dispensations will be considered for any special circumstances (older couples outside of childbearing years, infertility, medical issues, pregnancy, evidence that the couple already knows and is practicing a form of NFP, etc.) or any challenge the couple may be experiencing in these areas.

What is NFP?¹

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is the general title for the scientific, natural, and moral methods of family planning that can help married couples either achieve or postpone pregnancy.

NFP methods are based on the observation of the naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of a woman's menstrual cycle. No drugs, devices, or surgical procedures are used to avoid pregnancy.

Since the methods of NFP respect the love-giving (unitive) and life-giving (procreative) nature of the conjugal act, they support God's design for married love!

Who can use NFP?¹

Any married couple can use NFP! A woman need not have "regular" cycles. NFP education helps couples to fully understand and interpret their combined fertility, so that they can discern when to postpone or attempt pregnancy. The key to the successful use of NFP is **cooperation and communication** between husband and wife—a shared commitment.

What are the methods of NFP?¹

Each NFP method is focused on one or more signs of female fertility. They can be grouped into three categories:

1. Cervical Mucus Methods (CMM)

The methods that observe cervical mucus are commonly called the "Ovulation Method" or "OM." In NFP education, a woman learns how to identify the normal, healthy, cervical mucus which indicates the days that sexual intercourse is most likely to result in pregnancy. A number of NFP providers teach a variety of approaches to the observation and charting of cervical mucus (e.g., Billings Ovulation Method Association—USA, Creighton Model FertilityCare™ Centers, Family of the Americas, etc.).

2. Sympto-Thermal Methods (STM)

The methods that observe several signs of fertility and cross-check two or more of the signs to pinpoint ovulation are commonly called the "Sympto-Thermal Method" or "STM." STM typically combines charting of the Basal Body Temperature (BBT) and cervical mucus with other optional indicators, such as changes in the cervix and secondary fertility signs. A number of NFP providers teach a variety of approaches to the observation and charting of these signs (e.g., Couple to Couple League, Northwest Family Services, various diocesan programs, etc.).

3. **Sympto-Hormonal Method (SHM)**

The method that observes several signs of fertility and adds the use of an ovulation predictor kit (OPK) or fertility monitor is called the "Sympto-Hormonal Method" or "SHM." Similar to the STM, this approach adds the self-detection of reproductive hormones in the urine with the assistance of an OPK or fertility monitor. Various diocesan NFP programs make use of the SHM as well as Marquette University's Institute for NFP (Marquette Model).

What are the signs of fertility?¹

While in her fertile years, a woman's body provides several basic ways to identify the fertile and infertile times of her menstrual cycle. The rise and fall of reproductive hormones is responsible for these signs. Recognizing the pattern of those physical signs forms the basis for all methods of NFP.

Around the time of ovulation, a fluid or "mucus" is released from the woman's cervix (the opening of the uterus). When **cervical mucus** is present, it has the ability to keep sperm alive in the woman's body for several days.

Another sign of fertility that can be observed is a woman's daily waking temperature or "**basal body temperature**" (BBT). The BBT is taken after several hours of uninterrupted sleep. A woman's BBT is lower prior to ovulation and will rise .4 to .6 degrees Fahrenheit and stay elevated after ovulation. The higher elevated temperature signals the end of the fertile time.

An additional sign is a **change in the shape or texture of the cervix** itself. During the infertile time of the menstrual cycle, the cervix is low, closed and firm. Around the time of ovulation the cervix is high, open and soft.

With the development of ovulation prediction kits (or OPKs), the rise of certain reproductive hormones such as estrogen and luteinizing hormone (LH) can be observed. Finally, other optional signs, such as breast tenderness or minor abdominal pain at the time of ovulation, can also be observed by the woman.

How does NFP work?¹

NFP instruction helps married couples learn how to observe, interpret and chart the wife's signs of fertility. This enables husband and wife to identify the fertile and infertile phases of the wife's menstrual cycle.

When husband and wife wish to attempt pregnancy, they will understand that intercourse during the fertile phase of the wife's menstrual cycle will likely result in pregnancy. When wishing to postpone a pregnancy, husband and wife would abstain from sexual intercourse and any genital contact during the fertile time. No artificial methods are used during the fertile time.

NFP is unique among methods of family planning because it enables its users to work with the body rather than against it. Fertility is viewed as a gift and a reality to live, not a problem to be solved. The methods of Natural Family Planning respect God's design for married love!

NFP represents a unique approach to responsible parenthood because it

- calls for shared responsibility by husband and wife
- is based on scientific research about the signs of fertility
- treats each menstrual cycle as unique
- teaches husband and wife to daily observe the signs of fertility
- has no harmful side effects
- maximizes the possibility of achieving pregnancy when intercourse takes place during the fertile phase of the wife's menstrual cycle
- is effective for postponing pregnancy when intercourse takes place during the infertile phase of the wife's menstrual cycle
- respects the unitive and procreative nature of conjugal love

¹ <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/what-natural-family-planning>

² <https://www.spokenbride.com/blog/2020/6/22/three-methods-of-nfp-how-to-choose-one-for-you>

What are the benefits of NFP?¹

In NFP both husband and wife are taught to understand and live God's design for married love—this will give them countless blessings! NFP methods promote a holistic approach to family planning which both respects procreation and has the potential to deepen the intimacy of husband and wife.

NFP methods support reproductive health. They are good for the body. The natural methods have none of the harmful side effects caused by contraception, especially chemical contraceptives (e.g., pill, injection, etc.). For the woman, NFP charting can even assist in the diagnosis of underlying medical problems. And, if a couple find they are having trouble conceiving, NFP information can help them pinpoint the most fertile time of the wife's cycle.

NFP methods can be marriage strengthening. NFP relies on couple communication and behavior change. NFP methods require husband and wife to cooperate with each other in the most intimate area of their lives. During times of periodic sexual abstinence, husband and wife live a renewed courtship as they discover non-sexual ways to express their love for each other. On a practical level, husbands are encouraged to "tune into" their wives' cycles, and both spouses are encouraged to speak openly and frankly about their sexual desires, hopes for number of children, and prayerful discernment of God's will for their marriage. When living the NFP lifestyle, husband and wife learn that they have a shared responsibility for safeguarding God's gifts of human sexuality, marriage and family. They also grow in their understanding of God's will for their family size. NFP has the potential to make good marriages great!

NFP is good for marriage!

- Supports reproductive health
- Has no harmful side effects
- Is environmentally friendly
- Is inexpensive
- Cooperates with a couple's combined fertility
- Is useful to either achieve or avoid pregnancy
- Can be used throughout the reproductive life cycle
- Requires shared responsibility and cooperation by husband and wife
- Fosters mutual communication between husband and wife
- Encourages respect for and acceptance of the total person
- Promotes marital chastity
- Values the child
- Honors God's design for married love!

For a summary of scientific findings on the benefits of NFP, see the article included in your folder.

How effective are NFP methods for avoiding pregnancy?¹

Since NFP methods are not contraception, their effectiveness works both ways—for achieving and postponing pregnancy.

This is important news to married couple because typically "effectiveness" is thought to be "only" related to avoiding pregnancy. In NFP education, both husband and wife learn about their combined fertility and are taught how to live in harmony with God's design. They are also encouraged to discern whether God is calling them to attempt to have a child or to postpone a pregnancy. The methods of NFP are the only approach to true responsible parenthood because they respect God's design for married love!

Attempting Pregnancy

When couples wish to attempt pregnancy they can time sexual intercourse to the fertile window of the menstrual cycle, thereby optimizing the possibility of becoming pregnant.

Avoiding Pregnancy

When wishing to avoid pregnancy, studies show that couples who follow their NFP method's guidelines correctly, and all the time, achieve effectiveness rates of 97-99%.

Others, who are unclear about their family planning intention (i.e., spacing or limiting pregnancy) or are less motivated, will not consistently follow the method's guidelines and have a lower effectiveness rate of 80-90%.

How do I choose a method?²

It is a great blessing to have so many options available. A variety of methods means you can pick what works best for you based on your season of life and lifestyle.

- If you are someone who thrives on a schedule and wakes up at the same time every morning, the sympto-thermal method may be a great option for you because it not only requires checking cervical mucus throughout the day, you have an additional checkpoint for taking your temperature at the same time every morning.
- Perhaps you want something simple, and you want to track your cervical mucus, preferring to learn one thing at a time. Then, the mucus-only methods are the best option for you! Checking your cervical mucus is a part of each method and may be just what you need to get started.
- Maybe you are expecting a baby, and you would like to track your fertility postpartum, but know that hormones are adjusting and your fertility may not come back for a few months, so hormonal-only is a great option. It checks hormone levels in your urine and uses an electronic fertility monitor, while cross-checking mucus to help you navigate those early months as a new mom and beyond.

Take your time to learn about each method and ask questions of practitioners, so you feel comfortable and confident with the method you choose to move forward in your marriage.

I hope this encourages you and inspires you to know that the Catholic Church supports you in understanding your body, recognizing the beauty of your fertility, and relying on scientific research that supports a holistic approach to your health. This journey is not easy, but it is rewarding to put in the work and understand how incredible your body truly is!

Where can I learn NFP?¹

The best way to learn NFP is from a qualified instructor, that is, one who is certified from an NFP teacher training program. There are many options available online. The following options are approved by the Diocese of Dallas. If you find another option that you would like to use, just run it by the parish to make sure it qualifies for the marriage requirements in the diocese.

MyCatholicDoctor.com: <https://mycatholicdoctor.com/family-planning-fertility-care/>; this site can connect you with different types of practitioners and can facilitate using an HSA or insurance to pay for classes

Marquette Method: <https://www.marquette.edu/nursing/natural-family-planning-classes.php>

SymptoThermal Method: <https://www.symptopro.org/>

Creighton Fertility Care Practitioner: Loren Carpenter, MS, FCP; loren@fertilitycareftw.com; 214-717-7493

The Marriage Group: <https://themarriagegroup.com/courses/natural-family-planning/>

MyParishNFP: myparishnfp@ccli.org

Couple to Couple League: <https://ccli.powerappsportals.com/en-US/>

The Ocentric Fertility Care: theocentricguild@gmail.com

NFP Basics: ellen@vinesinfullbloom.com

The USCCB also has excellent resources for finding instructors and tools for NFP:

<https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/find-nfp-class> or use the QR code à



Other questions?

If you have questions about the Church's teaching on NFP, whether a specific course will meet the Diocesan requirements or need any other type of help with this course, please contact Amy Northrop, anorthrop@stadallas.org or 214-821-3360 x4130.

¹ <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/what-natural-family-planning>

² <https://www.spokenbride.com/blog/2020/6/22/three-methods-of-nfp-how-to-choose-one-for-you>