



# FERTILITY AWARENESS

## —THE ULTIMATE IN BIRTH CONTROL

by Katolen Yardley and Gabriella Toth

Understanding and managing one's fertility is a key issue for women, empowering them to make wise choices in their healthcare and lifestyle. Yet many women have little idea of how their body functions and are unaware of all the birth control options. Accurate data on these options can be difficult to obtain, prompting women to rely on medical doctors, who commonly prescribe the Pill.

The birth control market is largely controlled by the pharmaceutical industry which provides most of the currently available data, and promotes its products as the best and only truly effective methods of birth control. Contraceptives are a billion-dollar industry,

and it is evident that pharmaceutical corporations (with vested interests in maximizing profits) do not necessarily have consumers' best interests at heart.

It has also been suggested that the birth control pill was released onto the market prematurely, without detailed

investigation into the potential long-term effects. "The FDA approved the pill for marketing in 1960 without adequate testing or study... the pill became a gigantic experiment. Within two years, about 1.2 million American women used it and, by 1973, the number rose to an estimated ten million"<sup>(1)</sup>.

With the Pill only in use for 40 years, we are just beginning to determine the long-term side effects of synthetic hormones. As women become more aware of the vested interests behind mainstream choices, they are researching and weighing up the side effects and complications of synthetic hormones against more natural approaches. More and more questions are being asked, and many women are unhappy with the answers.

Women are searching for a contraceptive that is completely safe yet effective, reversible (providing no long-term side effects), non-invasive, easy to use and economical. And such an option does exist. The method of fertility awareness involves daily observation and charting of the body's fertile signs, namely basal body temperature, cervical fluid changes, and cervical position, to determine fertility—which actually accounts for only 4% of a woman's reproductive cycle<sup>(2)</sup>. This method should not be confused with the rhythm method (counting the dates of last cycle on a calendar in the hope of determining the next cycle), since this method has a very high failure rate due to the ever-changing nature of women's bodies and cycles.

### The Fertility Awareness Method (FAM) may be ideal for any women who:

- for health reasons are not advised to use the Pill; this includes anyone with a blood clotting disorder, history of strokes, heart disease, varicose veins, hepatitis, liver disease, breast cancer, jaundice during pregnancy, and any reproductive cancer, as well as abnormal genital bleeding<sup>(3)</sup>.
- are concerned about the complications and negative effects associated with the birth control pill. These side effects include nausea, increased blood pressure, urinary tract infections, recurrent yeast infections, diabetes, cervical dysplasia, weight gain, aggravation of

asthma, gum inflammation and skin rashes<sup>(1)</sup>, and are concerned about the related nutritional deficiencies, such as depletion of B vitamins, particularly folic acid, riboflavin, pyridoxine, and B12, vitamin C and iron<sup>(1)</sup>.

- are dissatisfied with other birth control methods and are searching for other options.

Using FAM is really quite simple and requires only a few minutes per day, plus the small cost of a thermometer. However, keep in mind that this method does not provide protection against sexually transmitted diseases.

**How natural family planning works:**

- 1) The first step is to take your basal body temperature, which is your resting temperature, best taken first thing in the morning before getting out of bed. The first half of one's cycle (day one to 12 or 13), is governed by the hormone estrogen, which keeps the temperature at a low level. Around ovulation, within 24 hours of an egg being released, progesterone (the heat-pro-

ducing hormone) levels increase and your temperature rises substantially for the remainder of your cycle (the temperature levels increase after ovulation has occurred). For most women, these variations can be seen very plainly with daily charting of temperature. (Although every woman is different, a rise of six-tenths of one degree or .6°F (.3° Celsius) is considered average.)

- 2) Cervical mucous provides visible warning of any oncoming fertile stage. The rising estrogen levels before ovulation produce a thin milky cervical mucous and, at the time of ovulation, the mucous becomes capable of being stretched into a thin continuous strand with one's fingers. This mucous is called Spinnbarkett (commonly referred to as spinn.), and indicates an extremely fertile stage of one's cycle<sup>(2)</sup>. This alkaline mucous functions as a medium for sperm motility and to provide protection from an otherwise acidic environment.
- 3) The final stage is cervical position. The cervix, which is the top of the uterus, provides a wealth of information at our fingertips. It prepares for ovulation by

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becoming soft and open, allowing passage for the sperm to pass through to the uterus. During the other weeks before and after ovulation, the cervix can be felt positioned lower in the vaginal canal, remaining closed and firm to the touch.

The fertility awareness method works well for women and couples who do not mind abstaining from sexual intercourse, or using alternative methods, during the fertile period (which accounts for roughly one-third of a woman's cycle)<sup>(3)</sup>. However, it is very important to be disciplined enough to chart daily, and responsible enough to act according to your findings. Before relying upon this method, women should seek professional advice or assistance to ensure that they are correctly interpreting the three indicators.

Despite the apparent lack of information about FAM, there have been many studies conducted in this area. One such study by the World Health Organization (WHO) spanned five countries and involved 890 women who contributed to 2,685 cycles of exposure. The results showed an effectiveness of 98.5%<sup>(4)</sup>. Following the study, Dr

J. Spieler of the WHO was quoted as saying, "This method we know works. It can provide very, very good protection against an unplanned pregnancy." The figure 98.5% results from couples abstaining from intercourse during fertile times<sup>(4)</sup>.

With nothing but abstinence being

100% effective, FAM rivals all other forms of birth control, including condoms, the IUD and the birth control pill. Yet, unlike these other approaches, there are no side effects. Affordable and easy to use, the fertility awareness method can be used to prevent an unplanned pregnancy or to achieve pregnancy when a couple decides to have a family.

- 1) *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the Boston's Women's Health Book Collective. Updated in 1992.
- 2) *A Cooperative Method of Natural Birth Control*, by Margaret Notziger.
- 3) *Taking Charge of Your Family, the definitive guide to natural birth control and pregnancy achievement*, by Toni Weschler.
- 4) *The Personal Fertility Guide* by Terri Guay.

For the official comments on the effectiveness of natural fertility awareness methods, write to the Ovulation Method Research and Reference Centre in Australia—The Family Life Centre, 27 Alexandra Parade, N. Fitzroy, Melbourne, VIC 3068, Australia. ■

Gabriella Toth and Katolen Yardley provide lectures on Fertility Awareness at the Gaia Garden Herbal Dispensary. For more information, please contact Katolen at (604) 734-4372.

**NOT FERTILE**  
Dry, no mucus

**SLIGHTLY FERTILE**  
Early mucous, sticky, thick, pasty, tacky, holds its shape

**FERTILE**  
Mucous, thin and watery, increasing amounts, translucent, cloudy, milky, clear, flowing

**EXTREMELY FERTILE**  
Profuse mucous, can be stretched into a clear, shimmering, delicate strand or thread before breaking


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