

## Making a Case for Marriage: Why Is Natural Family Planning (NFP) Good for Your Marriage?

*Part of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage*

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### The Situation

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is a general name for the methods of family planning that are based on a woman's menstrual cycle. A woman experiences clear, observable signs indicating when she is fertile and when she is infertile. By learning to observe and understand these signs, couples are enabled to participate in responsible family planning, whether a couple's situation calls for avoiding or achieving pregnancy. (USCCB, *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, [www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf))

One study found that only 3.5% of women, age 15-44, had ever used NFP, down from 4.2% seven years ago. The results of another survey show that only 230,000 of sexually active women are currently using modern NFP methods in comparison to 750,000 who still use the outdated Calendar Rhythm method. (*Use of NFP in the U.S. Remains Low*, Current Medical Research, Vol. 16, #1-2, 2005, 8-13, [www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/Win-Sp-05-CMR.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/Win-Sp-05-CMR.pdf))

Couples seeking to responsibly plan their families prefer a method that is natural and non-invasive, provides knowledge about reproductive functioning, has a positive impact on personal communication, does not diminish pleasure, and is effective. (*Psychological Aspects of Achieving or Avoiding Pregnancy*, L. J. Severy and J. Robinson, in *Integrating Faith and Science Through Natural Family Planning*, T. Notare and R.J. Fehring, 130, Marquette University Press, 2004)

### Social Science

The U.S. Bishops sponsored a study which revealed that 70% of married couples were satisfied with their use of NFP (*Factors Affecting Client Satisfaction on the Instruction and Usage of Natural Methods*, G.A. Boys, International Journal of Fertility, 33 [supplement], 1998, 56-64). Another study confirmed this, finding that 74% of NFP users expressed positive views of their experience. While many were challenged by the temporary abstinence required by the method, a majority benefited from improved relationship dynamics resulting in stronger bonds, better communication, and enhanced reproductive knowledge. (*Couple's Views of the Effects of NFP on Marital Dynamics*, VandeVusse, Hanson, Fehring, et al, Journal of Nursing Scholarship, Vol. 35, 2003, 171-176; reviewed in *Majority of Couples Experience Improved Relationships with Use of NFP*, Fehring, Current Medical Research, Vol. 15, #1-2, 2004, [www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/CMR042004.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/CMR042004.pdf))

NFP method effectiveness (perfect use) is 97-98%. Actual user effectiveness is 85-95%. Variations reflect the intention of the spouses. In cases where it would be inadvisable for a couple to conceive, actual effectiveness is closer to the method rate. When couples are able to be

more receptive of children, however, they often have less of a desire to follow all the NFP guidelines. For this reason, analysis of the accuracy of NFP must take into account the social research concerning couple's desires. (World Health Organization-USA, A Prospective Multicenter Trial of the Ovulation Method of Natural Family Planning: Part II. The Effectiveness Phase, *Fertility and Sterility*, Vol. 36, #5, 1981, 591-598; Ibid. Part IV. The Outcome of Pregnancy, *Fertility and Sterility*, Vol. 41, #4, 1984, 593-598; *Crossing the Threshold of Love*, M. Shivanandan, 234-270)

While artificial methods of contraception place the burden of responsibility primarily on women, NFP encourages intimate communication between spouses as they cooperate in fertility awareness and responsible family planning. (*Practice of NFP Versus the Use of Artificial Birth Control: Family, Sexual and Moral Issues*, M. Arzu Wilson, 6, [www.familyplanning.net/CSSRPublishCOLOR.pdf](http://www.familyplanning.net/CSSRPublishCOLOR.pdf))

### Church teaching / Pastoral Response

Church teaching affirms the link between the unitive and procreative ends of marriage. To maintain this necessary connection couples must remain open to life in every act of sexual intercourse. Modern methods of natural family planning aide couples in following God's will for the family, a community of life and love, by enabling couples to space births when it may be necessary. (*U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults*, USCCB, 409)

There is an inherent connection between the Church's moral teaching and people's personal and marital happiness. Regarding the support NFP provides for couples seeking to cooperate with the God-given structure and purpose of married love, Pope Paul VI described the fruit of NFP methods as peace and tranquility, thoughtfulness, and loving consideration. (*Humanae Vitae* 21)

Throughout his pontificate Pope John Paul II desired to integrate the scientific study of personal relationships with the revelation of God's plan for marriage. Recalling his reflections on the relationships of men and women, John Paul II spoke about how NFP methods enable a couple to remain open to God's gift of life while accounting for the whole person by "accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self-control." (*Familiaris Consortio* 32)

The U.S. Bishops' Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices stated that contemporary NFP methods are effective and healthy, provide an holistic approach to sexuality, foster the intimate communication of spouses on vital subjects, and encourage diverse and creative ways of expressing affection. (*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, 42). More recently, the U.S. Bishops affirmed that "The Church's support for NFP is not based on its being 'natural' as opposed to artificial. Rather, NFP respects the God-given power to love a new human life into being even when we are not actively seeking to exercise that power." They go on to explain that NFP is something that all people can accept, not only from a moral perspective, but also through realizing the benefits NFP offers both physically, by not changing the body through drugs or devices, and emotionally, leading couples to show greater attentiveness to and respect for each other. (USCCB, *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, [www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf))

## Conclusion

NFP is healthy, safe, and effective. In addition, social science has found that natural methods of family planning enhance the interpersonal communication of married couples in a number of ways. The Church encourages all people to promote further research, awareness and education, and use of natural family planning as both moral and beneficial to married couples' happiness and fulfillment.