

Cycle Tracking for Family Planning

You can use cycle tracking methods to both achieve and avoid pregnancy, empowering couples to decide together when the time is right to bring a child into the world. If you know when you may be fertile, you can use this knowledge to time intimacy with your partner according to your family planning goals. This requires that couples share responsibility for family planning and communicate with love and respect to determine if and when sex will happen.

Components of Fertility

The three key components to conceive a baby are quality sperm, an egg, and good cervical fluid. Good cervical fluid is a clear, slippery, or stretchy type of fluid that appears similar to raw egg white. It is critical for sperm survival and indicates when a woman is in her fertile window. A woman's fertile window is short: a man and a woman together are likely only fertile for 3-6 days each cycle. In terms of the male factor of fertility, there are three aspects of healthy sperm: sperm count, sperm motility, and sperm shape.

Classes of Cycle Tracking

- 1) Cervical fluid: Ovulation is closely linked with a change in a woman's cervical fluid patterns (recall that fertile type cervical fluid looks like raw egg whites). Any of the methods that involve charting cervical fluid, whether alone or in conjunction with other observations, can be helpful in monitoring overall health in addition to preventing or achieving pregnancy.
- 2) Sympto-thermal: This method requires women to track their cervical fluid patterns AND take their basal body temperature daily. Basal body temperature is another good way to tell if ovulation has occurred, so charting this sign in addition to cervical fluid is further confirmation of a healthy cycle.
- 3) Sympto-hormonal: This method requires women to track their cervical fluid patterns AND urinary hormones using test strips and a fertility monitor.
- 4) Algorithm: These methods are simple, evidence-based forms of cycle tracking based on algorithms that utilize cycle day to determine a woman's fertile window.

Cycle Tracking Effectiveness

Cycle tracking methods can be highly effective for preventing pregnancy. Real unintended pregnancy rates vary between methods, but range from as low as 2 -14% based on the highest quality research studies. Remember that cycle tracking methods are behavioral methods. This means that we rely on the users and their intentions (which might change!) which accounts for the difference between perfect use and typical use statistics. Let's check out the numbers:

- Sympto-Thermal Method: 99.4-99.6% effectiveness with perfect use
98-99% effectiveness with typical use
- Billings Ovulation Method: 98.9% effectiveness with perfect use
89.5% effectiveness with typical use

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Choosing a Method That's Right for You

To figure out which method aligns most closely with your goals and preferences consider the following:

- Why do you want to chart?
 1. To prevent pregnancy? To monitor health?
- Which biomarkers do I want to track?
- How much time and money are you willing to invest in learning the method?
 1. What devices or technology are you willing to use/purchase?
 2. Do you want a teaching method that involves your partner?
 3. Do you want to learn online or in person?
- Do you want to track with an app?
 1. If you choose an app, remember that you are smarter than your smartphone! Don't depend on your phone to determine your fertile window – learn to read your body for yourself. There are a lot of apps out there, and most of them are not evidence-based for pregnancy prevention. Look for resources linked to this lesson for recommendations for apps you can trust.

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