Busting the Myths about Natural Family Planning

Perhaps you have seen the popular Discovery Channel television show “Mythbusters”, the show that “aims to uncover the truth behind popular myths and legends by mixing scientific method with gleeful curiosity and plain old-fashioned ingenuity.” We thought it would be fun to apply the same format to Natural Family Planning, as the myths and misconceptions about NFP are so widely disseminated and believed that some qualify as urban legends. For instance….

**Myth #1: NFP is just the old-school Rhythm Method.**

There are many jokes floating around about NFP, such as calling it “Vatican Roulette”, or the comeback, “You know what they call people who use NFP, don’t you? - Pregnant!” Is NFP really so ineffective?

Well, in a sense, prior to modern scientific NFP techniques, the old school Rhythm Method did result in many babies being born - which isn’t a bad thing! This is because a woman’s fertility was predicted largely based on the length of past menstrual cycles, assuming that the fertile time was around day 14, the average halfway point in a regular cycle. As many women will tell you, their cycles are as unique as they are, and most women will have irregular cycles at some point in their reproductive life, leaving the Rhythm Method ineffective at postponing a pregnancy for serious reasons.

That was then, this is now. NFP has advanced with every other area of medicine and technology. In fact, Modern NFP techniques are very effective - up to 99% - at delaying conception of a child when used properly, and likewise very effective at helping achieve pregnancy by predicting the most fertile times of a woman’s cycle. This is done through observation of changes in body temperature, cervical mucus, or cervix shape.

The methods are tried and true. In fact, a couple can increase their fertility awareness by charting for just a short time. And, according to the Pope Paul VI Institute of Reproductive Medicine, a leader in NFP awareness and training, up to 80 percent of couples experiencing infertility can achieve pregnancy with the help of consistent charting and proper medical treatment that works with the woman’s body.

**Myth #2: Abstinence is too much to expect from a married couple.**

Straight up, not everything about NFP is easy. Abstinence can be a trial, especially when one or both spouses desire intimacy but have discerned that it is not God’s plan for them to conceive a child at that time. However, for most women, the fertile time when you would remain abstinent is on average 7-10 days out of every cycle of 28-32 days.

Abstinence is a normal part of life. As you are reading this article, what are you doing? That's right, abstaining. What about times of illness or stress, or travel, or sickness, or when your wife is post partum?

Within marriage, abstinence offers times for self-sacrificial love, especially when chosen out of respect for God’s Divine Plan for your family. By expressing affection, tenderness, and intimacy in other ways, a husband and wife affirm their love for each other, and witness to their children and others, outside of the marital embrace.

We realize that this message is countercultural, perhaps even extreme in some eyes. And yet, the message of Jesus Christ is an extreme one, and has been for over 2000 years. To experience the graces that flow into your marriage from God, helping you build a strong
foundation, is worth much more than any immediate pleasure can bring through the use of contraception.

**Myth #3: Using Contraception is the Responsible Thing to Do**

You’ve likely heard from “environmentalists” that the planet is being overpopulated, causing global warming, and leading to the end of our life on Earth, and that if you are having more than 2 children, you are wreaking havoc on our natural resources, and ensuring our doom. In reality, there are countries that will cease to exist in a short time, but it’s not because of overpopulation. Just the opposite is happening. Countries are actually contracepting and aborting themselves out of existence. In fact, some governments who have realized this, are giving residents of their country bonuses exceeding $9,000 for having a second child, in hopes of rebuilding their reproduction rate before it’s too late.

Most people, including medical professionals, have bought into this misguided “contraceptive mentality” so pervasive in our world today. No doubt, in our society we live in fertility fear. The culture has taught us that children are threats, not gifts.

Another thing is certain, NFP is not part of the huge, corporate pharmaceutical culture that produces and markets all different types of artificial contraceptives, and provides incentives to doctors who prescribe them. In fact, nowadays, some doctors are prescribing contraception - even to children as young as 11 or 12 - as a means of reducing acne, PMS, or even to suppress menstruation altogether. This is a travesty given all of the harmful and sometimes deadly side effects related to chemical contraception, including, but not limited to, high blood pressure, blood clots, stroke, heart attack, depression, weight gain, and migraines.

Just think about it. Learn NFP for a small fee, touch up later when necessary, and unless you have problems necessitating medical intervention, you could have absolutely zero costs the rest of your reproductive life. No monthly pill bills. That is a pharmaceutical nightmare. The pill is big business. There is an economic incentive to discourage NFP.

If you take these things into consideration, along with the effectiveness of NFP described above, contraception no longer seems all that responsible. And women are starting to understand this, even if for purely secular reasons, and have decided to take back their bodies in a healthy, organic, and natural way. There is also a growing number of physicians opening their minds to this gift because they see the number of women being harmed by contraception, and they are choosing to become certified in modern NFP methods. Patients often get a second opinion in medicine for a host of reasons. If your physician discourages NFP, find a physician who will support you.

**Myth #4: NFP is “Catholic Contraception”**

“What’s the difference? If you use NFP to avoid the conception of a child, isn’t that the same result as using artificial birth control?”

While the result of not conceiving a baby may be the same, the difference in the means is everything in the world. Catholic teaching encourages responsible parenthood, which involves ongoing discernment through prayer about God’s plan for your family, and provides for the postponing of conception of children for sufficiently serious reasons. So why can’t you use contraception or sterilization to fulfill what you discern to be God’s will?

First of all, chemical contraceptives can cause abortions by creating a hostile environment in the womb so that a newly conceived baby is unable to attach to the lining of the uterus. But the Church also teaches against barrier methods of contraception. To understand these teachings, we must first understand intercourse - “the marital embrace” - as a gift from God meant to draw us closer in intimacy as husband and wife and to work with God as co-creators of life. The Church has long taught that it was God’s intent that
both of these be present in every marital embrace - that we give all of ourselves to one another, thereby becoming “one body” (Genesis 2:24).

The use of contraception suppresses or blocks the gift of fertility. On a deeper, spiritual level, when a spouse shuts off his or her fertility intentionally to avoid the other’s fruitfulness, that spouse is saying to the other that there is a part of you I do not wish to receive, and a part of me I do not wish to give. Likewise, the other co-Creator, God Himself, is shut out of the act. Contraception can also breed abuse of the marital embrace, and ultimately of one another, for purely physical pleasure.

NFP, on the other hand, when practiced with a pure heart, respects fertility as a beautiful and powerful part of who we are, and works with the sexual design of our bodies by our Creator, inviting Him into each act of marital intimacy. Couples can discern if the “time is right” and if their hearts are right with each embrace. If the time it is not right, spouses don’t engage in the act, thereby protecting the sacredness of the act.

Discernment of God’s will for us is a day to day, sometimes hour to hour and minute to minute process. Contraception obstructs the discernment process in that it takes months, sometimes years, to undo the fertility suppression by chemical means. Even if you would discern it was the right time for a child, you couldn’t fulfill God’s plan for your family. With NFP there is nothing to undo.

It is true that NFP can also be abused when used with a contraceptive mentality. Because it can be so effective at postponing a pregnancy, some couples may use it to avoid a child for selfish reasons or use it outside of marriage. Couples can also abuse the marital embrace if they are only seeking self pleasure. Understanding NFP in light of Church teachings, helps to prevent these abuses.