
5 The Effectiveness of NFP

Lesson 5

Natural Family Planning has no harmful side effects. It involves knowledge of one's fertility, and it enriches the mutual respect for the dignity of each spouse. But, does it actually provide reliable information regarding a woman's fertility on a daily basis, and is it really effective in helping a couple to plan or postpone a pregnancy?

Effectiveness is a percentage normally derived from studies that have determined *unintended pregnancy* rates. An **unintended pregnancy rate** is measured in terms of the number of couples out of 100 who become pregnant using a method for one year. Therefore, an unintended pregnancy rate of 15% or 0.15 means 15 couples out of 100 conceived during one year of using that method of birth control. A 99% effective rule or method, therefore, means that 99 couples out of 100 did not conceive during one year of using that method of birth control. There are also two types of effectiveness: **method effectiveness** and **user**

effectiveness.

Method Effectiveness

This is the effectiveness of a particular method of family planning that assumes *perfect use*, and is calculated using *only* those pregnancies that resulted from correctly following the rules of the method and the cycles in which the method was correctly and consistently used.

For NFP users of a particular rule or method, this would include any pregnancy that occurs even when the couple correctly follows and applies all of the rules without exception. A parallel example involving the birth control pill would be including pregnancies that occur when the pill is taken exactly as prescribed without exception. A high method effectiveness implies that, when used correctly, the user can experience a very high confidence level that the rules will identify days of fertility and infertility.

User Effectiveness

This is the effectiveness of a particular method of family planning based on the *actual practices* of the couples using the method. It is calculated using all pregnancies occurring during a study and *all* months or cycles, which includes incorrect and correct application of a method and its rules.

For example, the calculation of user effectiveness of the Sympto-Thermal Method of NFP would include an unintended pregnancy that resulted from a couple who engaged in the marital embrace during days when mucus was present prior to ovulation. User effectiveness also accounts for a couple's understanding and application of the rules. Reliability is reduced through poor instruction or inaccurate recordings. For all methods, user effectiveness will always be less than, or equal to, method effectiveness.

STM Effectiveness

German Study

A study of the effectiveness of the sympto-thermal rules associated with NFP was published in 2007.¹ The study used rules that were comparable to CCL's Day 5/6 Rule and Sympto-Thermal Rule, and found a method effectiveness of 99.6% and a user effectiveness of 98.2%. (See Reference Guide, page 232, for a more-detailed discussion of this study.)

Other Data

As previously indicated, many of the rules presented in the NFP classes taught by CCL are based on the early work of Dr. Josef Roetzer. Since his early pioneering work, others have confirmed the effectiveness of the Sympto-Thermal Method. For example, a large study

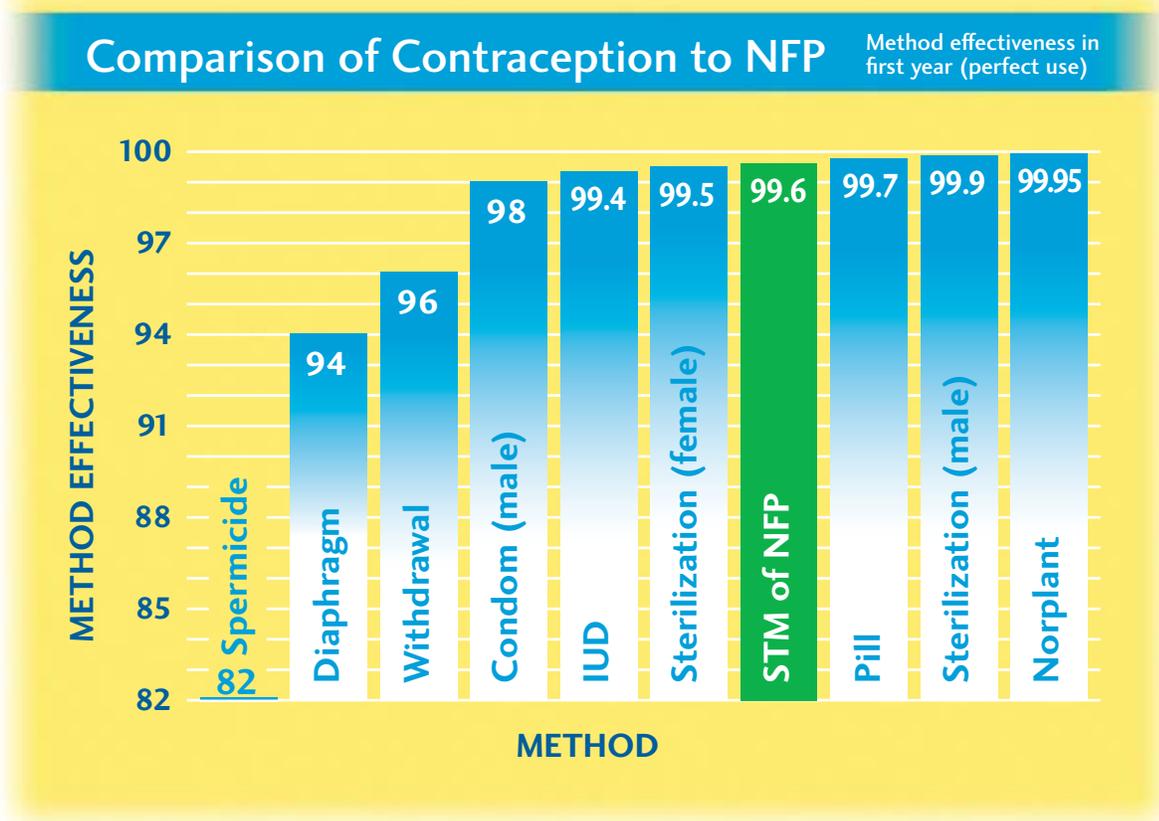
¹ P. Frank-Herrmann, J. Heil, C. Gnoth, et al. "The effectiveness of a fertility awareness based method to avoid pregnancy in relation to a couple's sexual behaviour during the fertile time: a prospective longitudinal study," *Human Reproduction* 22(5) (2007):1310-1319.

² European Natural Family Planning study groups. "Prospective European Multi-center study of natural family planning (1989-1992): interim results," *Advances in Contraception* 9 (1993):269-283.

conducted in nine countries in Europe found a user effectiveness of over 97%.² Another study conducted in the 1990s found a method effectiveness of 99.4% and a user effectiveness of 97.8%.³ (See Reference Guide, page xxx for a more detailed discussion of the data supporting CCL’s rules.)

Comparative Effectiveness of Methods

While NFP’s effectiveness can be compared to that of contraceptives, there are differences between the two. Natural Family Planning effectiveness pertains to a couple’s ability to determine fertile and infertile times of a woman’s cycle. The effectiveness of various contraceptives relates to the ability of pills or devices to prevent a pregnancy from occurring or from continuing. The user effectiveness of NFP also involves the ability of a couple to refrain from sexual intercourse on days that the method indicates are fertile if they intend to postpone a pregnancy. The user effectiveness of contraceptives relates to a woman/couple using the devices or taking the pills as specified if they intend to postpone a pregnancy.



³ P. Frank-Herrmann et al. “Natural family planning with and without barrier method use in the fertile phase: efficacy in relation to sexual behavior: a German prospective long-term study,” *Advances in Contraception* 13 (1997)179-189.

The graph on the previous page compares the *method effectiveness* of various forms of contraception with NFP.^{4,5} It should be noted that no method is 100% effective; unplanned pregnancies occur in all methods of birth control.

In summary, the Sympto-Thermal Method of NFP (green bar on the graph) taught in this course is extremely effective in determining the fertile and infertile times of a woman's cycle. The 2007 German study also showed that couples who have a desire to postpone a pregnancy during a given cycle can do so using NFP with the same accuracy as contraceptives.

⁴ R. Hatcher, et al., *Contraceptive Technology*, 18th revised edition (New York, NY: Ardent Media, 2004), see Table 31-1, pp 792–847.

⁵ Frank-Herrmann, *ibid.*

Notes