



HLI EDUCATIONAL SERIES

Looking at life and family issues in the light of faith and reason.

CONTRACEPTION vs. NFP

*What is the
Difference Between
Contraception and
Natural Family
Planning?*



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What is the Difference Between Contraception and Natural Family Planning?

Every married couple has the responsibility to prayerfully practice what the Catholic Church calls “responsible parenthood,” as it pertains to the number and spacing of children. Spouses are to exercise this responsibility with generosity in receiving the gift of life, and with prudence, while avoiding selfishness and carelessness. Although children are the supreme gift of marriage, Catholic couples are not obliged to have as many children as humanly possible. While always remaining open to the possibility of a new life, couples may, when a serious reason is present, choose to postpone pregnancy.

But how can a married couple practice responsible parenthood? While our culture sees contraception as the best way to “plan” a family, the Catholic Church teaches that choosing to make oneself infertile through contraception is irresponsible and an “intrinsic evil.” Married couples are called to embrace and to be open to children, who are a living sign of their love. Instead of using contraception, couples who have a serious reason to postpone pregnancy may use a method based on fertility awareness, and then choose to abstain from intercourse when it is known that pregnancy is likely. Done with the right intention, fertility awareness, or “Natural Family Planning (NFP),” is fully supported by the Church, and it can be an effective and beautiful way for a married couple to embrace the gift of marriage responsibly.

You might be wondering: What’s the difference between the “natural” method and medical or barrier methods? Isn’t the goal the same? To answer these fair questions, we can compare the use of contraception and NFP on such key issues as health, love and morality.

Much Better for Women's Health

Contraception: Medical journals have published countless studies indicating unwanted side effects of contraception. Breast cancer risks are elevated for oral contraceptive users: the World Health Organization identifies synthetic estrogen as a class 1 carcinogen (the same category as cigarettes and asbestos). Stroke risk is higher for users of oral contraception, with studies showing a 50% to 300% higher rates. The *Physician's Desk Reference* states it "is well established" that blood clots are a significant risk for women who use oral contraception, and the FDA warned in 2012 that the newest generation of oral contraceptives carries a 2-3 times greater risk of blood clots than prior versions. Oral contraceptive users have a greater risk of heart attack than non-users, and their arteries develop plaque at a faster rate. On top of all of this, contraception is used to debilitate a healthy and functioning organ system – by design, it works against the woman's body.

Knowing all of this, what man would want his wife to take these risks, especially when there is a healthier method available?

NFP: In a culture increasingly concerned with "going green" and "all natural" products, it is ironic that we continue to encourage women to use harmful synthetic steroids when an all-natural, life-affirming, and healthy alternative is available. NFP not only allows women to avoid consumption of often dangerous drugs, it is often used to help identify health problems that only come to light when paying close attention to fertility. For example, the Creighton Model of fertility awareness has a long and growing track record of identifying signs of underlying and previously untreated conditions, and women's lives are being changed by their diagnosis and treatment. Husbands should ensure that their spouses are healthy. Practicing NFP is one way of doing this.

Sexuality and New Life

Contraception: Marriage and sexuality are gifts from God by which man and woman unite in love and create new life. Contraception deliberately removes these intrinsic meanings (union and procreation) from sex and does harm to marriage itself and to one's spouse. As Pope Paul VI wrote in *Humanae vitae*, "To use this divine gift [while] destroying...its meaning and its purpose is to

contradict the nature both of man and of woman and of their most intimate relationship, and therefore it is to contradict also the plan of God and His will.” (HV 13) Using contraception involves the rejection of God’s design and the fertility of one’s spouse. It does not allow for true intimacy because with contraception, since in using contraception spouses “protect” themselves from one another and the fruit of marital love – a child. Contraception undermines self-gift to one’s spouse and, when a child is conceived, often leads to the couple seeing the child as an “accident” that can be “fixed” with abortion.

NFP: NFP expresses a profound openness to God’s will for a couple and embraces both the unitive and procreative meanings of marital intimacy. It respects God’s laws and His careful design and also recognizes that we are not “the arbiter of the sources of human life, but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator.” NFP allows for love and gift of self to one’s spouse and thus enriches and deepens the love between spouses. Sexual intercourse remains a true act of love, and never involves acting against a potential child – the couple is never opposed to the fruit of their love and thus they are capable of giving and receiving the complete gift of self that they desire.

Culture and Relationships

Contraception: When Pope Paul VI wrote his encyclical *Humanae vitae*, he made four predictions of what would follow widespread acceptance of contraception: 1) an increase in infidelity, 2) a general lowering of morality, 3) a loss of respect for and objectification of women, and 4) governments would coerce their population to use contraception if they felt its use furthered the “good of the state.” (HV 17) Sadly, all of these predictions have come true, as the “contraceptive mentality” that follows its widespread acceptance has led to a culture that demeans women, often forces contraception on poor citizens, and increases societal acceptance of and dependence on abortion. Blessed John Paul II emphasized that contraception and abortion are fruits of the same tree, and are hallmarks of a Culture of Death.

NFP: The vast majority of NFP users find that it fosters a union between spouses that is fully human, open to God’s will and allows for total gift of self to one another. It involves sacrifice, and so fosters a greater appreciation for one’s spouse and the gift of marital love. Among the positive benefits of

NFP is that occasionally sacrifice in the bedroom helps prevent selfishness from entering the marriage and it fosters a more peaceful relationship between spouses who are more apt to resolve or avoid other problems. Further, it encourages couples to express affection and love for one another in ways that are not sexual and discourages couples from seeing one another as objects of pleasure. (see *Humanae vitae* 21) Perhaps it is no surprise that studies indicate that users of NFP report greater intimacy, satisfaction with their sex lives, and significantly lower divorce rates than contraception users.

One More Comparison

While much more could be said about the differences between Natural Family Planning and contraception, perhaps one more simple comparison would illustrate the problem with separating the goods that follow from our choices with regard to basic human needs. Most people know intuitively that a healthy diet is better for a person than bulimia – the disorder in which one intentionally regurgitates food in order to avoid calories. The healthy eater uses her freedom and self-control to choose wisely what she eats, while the one suffering with bulimia acts from a corrupt notion of freedom that seeks to escape the consequences of her choices – she separates the good of the taste of food from its nutritional aspect.

While most of us can see why this is obviously unhealthy with regard to food, most of us have lost that intuitive understanding of why contraception is so unhealthy, even though *both contraception and bulimia are unhealthy for the same basic reason*. Both are very unhealthy not only physically, but because they both represent an abuse of freedom based on the desire to have the good “taste” without the consequences. Ultimately, it is clear why rejecting the natural ends of such basic human goods as eating and sexuality yields very unhealthy results, both physically and spiritually. And using the virtue of temperance – of not overdoing a good thing – applies to every way in which we satisfy our basic human needs.

If marriage is your vocation, then you are called to responsible parenthood. Sometimes this may involve using NFP to postpone having a child, or to achieve pregnancy. The vast majority of couples who use NFP find that it strengthens marriage because it respects freedom, and couples find

themselves richly rewarded for their commitment both to God's law and to one another.

Further reading:

The Couple to Couple League: www.ccli.org/nfp

www.TheBillingsOvulationMethod.org

The Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction: <http://www.popepaulvi.com/index.php>

Humanae vitae, an encyclical of Pope Paul VI

Visit www.hli.org/contraception for the full HLI Educational Series on contraception, and other resources.





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BY FR. PAUL MARX, OSB

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