

New Natural Family Planning Method Gains Ground

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(March 28, 2008) A natural family planning method in which women use a set of beads to keep track of their fertile days is gaining wide acceptance among women and their partners, according to a new study.

Called the Standard Days Method (SDM), it was developed by Dr. Victoria Jennings, director of the Georgetown University Institute for Reproductive Health in Washington, D.C. Women with menstrual cycles between 26 and 32 days are taught that they can become pregnant on days eight through 19 of their cycle. They use a specially designed set of beads called CycleBeads to keep track of their fertile days, when they can abstain from sex and avoid becoming pregnant.

The method has proven to be 95 percent effective when used correctly, and appeals to women who are tired of both the expense and risks of hormonal birth control.

“I’m really convinced that this is a method that needs to be part of an informed choice approach to family planning,” Dr. Jennings told *Reuters Health*. “Women have lots of options and they need to be aware of this one.”

In a new study of SDM which was published in the March issue of *Contraception*, the method was subjected to a “real world” test.

Rebecka I. Lundgren of Georgetown and colleagues from the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, DC, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine worked with family planning groups, health ministries and community development organizations in 14 locations in Latin America, Africa and Asia. More than 1600 women agreed participated in the study by using SDM.

Age, education and past use of modern contraceptives varied widely among the women. Even though natural family planning methods are associated with religious beliefs, most of the women in the study said they chose to participate because the method was side-effect free, didn’t affect women’s health and was inexpensive. Participants either abstained during their fertile days of their cycle or used some other method of birth control.

The results were 14.1 pregnancies for every 100 women per year of use of the method, which compares to the 12 pregnancies per 100 woman years found in a 2002 clinical trial of the same method. The main reason women got pregnant, the researchers found, was that couples “knowingly took the risk” of having unprotected sex on fertile days.

One of the more surprising findings in the new study was the level of involvement among the women’s partners. “Men reported being very satisfied with the method, and a significant number of men reported being involved in some way in helping their partner to use this method,” Dr. Jennings said.

Ninety percent of both men and women in the study said they felt the SDM was easy to use, and that they would recommend it to others.

“Here in the U.S., most of the women who choose to use it appear to be previous users of hormonal methods who have basically decided that they want to do something natural now,” Jennings noted. When used properly, she added, the SDM is nearly as effective as the Pill and more effective than the diaphragm or condoms.

SDM was developed in 2002 and used highly sophisticated computer analyses of thousands of menstrual cycles lasting between 26 and 32 days. Data from more than 7,500 different cycles was compiled and recorded by computers. This data was then analyzed in order to find out when fertile days occurred during a woman’s menstrual cycle. All aspects of fertility were taken into account, including ovulation and the typical lifespan of both sperm and eggs. Based on this information, SDM concludes that the most fertile days of a woman’s cycle are days eight through 19.

Women can use the color-coded CycleBeads, which is a string of 32 beads in the shape of a necklace, to keep track of where they are in their cycle. A rubber ring is placed around individual beads to mark each day. The lone red bead on the necklace is used to track the first day in the cycle. The brown beads signify infertile days and the white glow-in-the-dark beads signify the days on which to abstain.

It is estimated that more than 50,000 U.S. women are currently using the method with at least a half million more using it around the world.

“To our surprise, people in other settings where family planning was readily available, there was a spark of interest there as well,” Dr. Jennings has found. “There has become more interest in a method that works with your body and that maybe helps you learn something about your body, as opposed to a method that suppresses your body's normal function.”

For more information about the Standard Days Method, visit the Georgetown website at www.irh.org

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