

Managing Your Fertility Naturally



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1. Introduction

What is Serena?

Serena is an organization of certified volunteer teachers who provide information about fertility awareness and natural family planning (NFP) in general, and teach the Symptothermal Method in particular. Serena was founded in 1955 in Quebec and was incorporated nationally in 1974.

Our name is an acronym **SE**ervice for **RE**gulation of **NA**tality. Serena is committed to helping couples work in harmony with their natural fertility, not against it, to achieve their goals of family planning.

What is Natural Family Planning?

Natural Family Planning is a highly effective, safe approach that allows couples to work together and share the responsibility of managing their own fertility. Our clients learn to observe and chart natural changes in a woman's body that reveal when she is fertile or infertile on any given day of her menstrual cycle. With this knowledge they can determine when they are fertile as a couple and avoid or engage in intercourse depending on whether or not they are trying to conceive. NFP has no health risks or side effects and fosters positive communication.

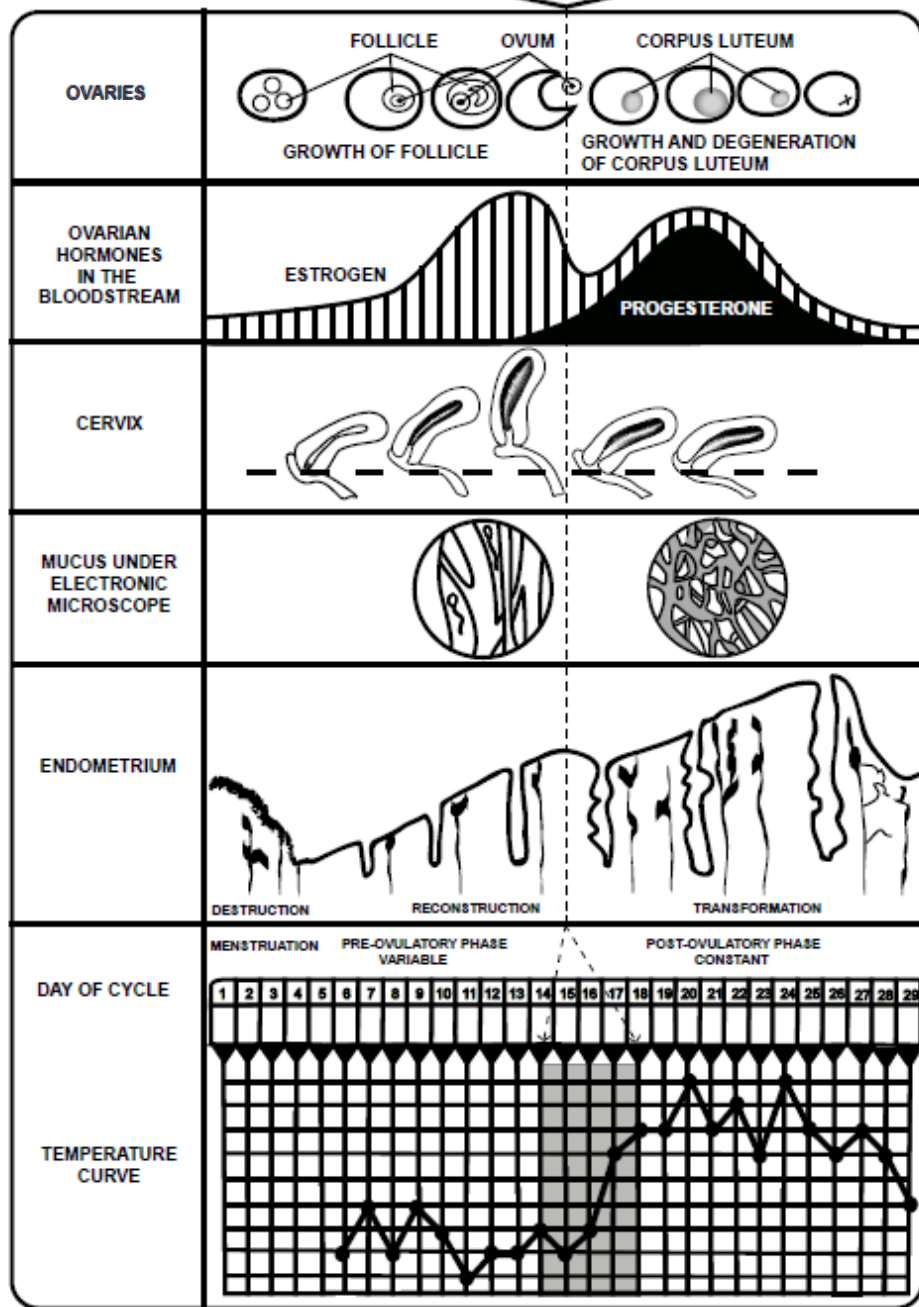
2. Some Basics about Human Reproduction

A woman's fertility is cyclical by nature. Day one of any menstrual cycle is the day menstrual bleeding begins in full. The cycle progresses to ovulation (release of an ovum) and continues for approximately another two weeks. A new cycle starts when the menstrual bleeding starts anew.

Within each cycle there is a sequence of events influenced by the body's hormone pattern. During menstruation sexual hormones are at their base level. A few days after menstruation the level of the hormone estrogen will rise. This brings about changes in the woman's body, particularly the maturing of the ovum. When the estrogen level reaches its peak, a signal is directed to the brain and a new hormone is produced in the body, which causes ovulation or the release of an ovum into the fallopian tube. On rare occasions, a second egg is released shortly after the first one (non-identical twins are evidence of this). Researchers estimate there is less than 24 hours during which these eggs (one or two) could be fertilized. The hormonal changes make it impossible for another ovulation to happen before the next cycle.

When fertility signs appear, before ovulation, estrogen also causes the woman's vaginal discharge to change in appearance and sensation. This discharge is mucus that is produced in her cervix (the opening to the uterus). As the days after menstruation progress, the mucus will become wet and slippery (lubricated), like raw egg white. This type of mucus helps prolong the life of sperm deposited inside the woman's body.

OVULATION



THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OVARIAN ACTIVITY, OVARIAN HORMONES IN THE BLOODSTREAM, THE CERVIX, THE MUCUS, THE ENDOMETRIUM AND THE TEMPERATURE CURVE DURING THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

The male reproductive system produces sperm continually. Sperm can live from a few hours to six days or longer in rare cases. Its capacity to survive and fertilize an ovum depends on its own vitality and on the woman's fertile-type mucus described above. If the couple is not aware of the beginning of the fertility window, they may engage in intercourse several days prior to ovulation and still achieve a pregnancy.

After ovulation has occurred the hormone progesterone is released in the woman's body, which causes the lining of the uterus to thicken in preparation for implantation of a developing baby. Progesterone also causes the woman's basal body temperature (temperature taken at rest) to rise and remain elevated until her next period begins. If conception does not occur, the lining of the uterus sheds and the next menstrual cycle begins.

There are approximately 12 to 16 days from the time of ovulation until the start of the next menstrual bleeding. This is common to all women, whether they have long or short cycles.

A limited window of opportunity exists in each menstrual cycle when pregnancy can be achieved. Natural family planning teaches couples how to determine when this fertile time is occurring in each cycle. The pattern can be clearly seen when the woman monitors and charts her vaginal discharge, basal body temperature and other body changes.

With this knowledge the couple can choose to abstain from intercourse during the fertile time in order to avoid a pregnancy. Alternatively, this knowledge can also help couples maximize their chances of achieving a pregnancy if that is their goal.

A woman's cervix also has a changing pattern throughout the cycle, driven by the same hormones that influence the

cervical mucus. Self-examination techniques can be learned, and these changes can be detected. When the woman is most fertile the cervix is higher in the body, open, soft and straight. When she is not fertile the cervix will be lower in the body, closed, firm and tilted.

3. Natural Family Planning

Natural family planning is based on sound scientific facts. Modern methods use knowledge of natural, documented changes to empower couples to work with the gift of their fertility when planning their families. Too often, we take fertility for granted or treat it as a burden, while the experience of couples struggling with infertility reminds us how fertility is valued and how precious life is.

Natural family planning is often confused with the “Rhythm” Method, which was based on approximate calculations, without any observation of the signs of hormonal activity related to the current cycle. It was often frustrating and ineffective.

The “Temperature-only Method”, useful in its time, is also of limited use because it does not indicate the beginning of the fertile window. Modern methods of natural family planning are much more precise than those methods because they can both predict and confirm ovulation. They are highly effective for motivated couples.

4. Modern Methods of NFP

The modern methods of NFP are much more accurate. They are: the Cervical Mucus Methods (*Billings Ovulation Method*, *Creighton Model FertilityCare™ System* and *the TwoDay Method*), which focus on observation of cervical mucus, and the Symptothermal Method, which charts changes in mucus and basal body temperature, as well as other supportive signs. The latter is the method taught by Serena.

5. The Cervical Mucus Methods

Mucus secreted by the cervix (neck of the uterus) undergoes daily changes under the influence of cyclical hormones. A woman is taught to observe and chart the changes in this mucus as it flows at the vaginal opening to determine when she is fertile. After menstruation, there are typically a few days of dryness when no mucus is observed or sensed outside of the woman's body.

The mucus symptoms begin when the sensation of dryness changes. Initially there will be a slight sensation of moistness and stickiness, which may be accompanied by a discharge of thick and opaque mucus. From then on, the woman should consider herself fertile.

The mucus transforms again as the estrogen level rises. There will be an increasing sensation of wetness and slipperiness: the mucus will appear more and more transparent, stretchy, and thready. This is the most fertile mucus and will last for a few days. The "peak day" is the **last** day the mucus can be described by the following characteristics: wet, slippery, transparent, stretchy, and thready. It is important to note that the sensation is more important than the appearance of mucus and that the sensation of lubrication may persist longer than the visible signs.

Following the peak day, the mucus may disappear immediately or continue for several days in the form of transitional mucus, similar to what it looked like when it started. Menstruation occurs about two weeks after the peak.

Drs. John and Evelyn Billings have developed a series of rules for using mucus observation as the sole basis for periodic abstinence. The Creighton Model FertilityCare™

System is a variation of the Billings Ovulation Method. The basic rules for couples wishing to prevent conception are that they abstain from all genital contact:

- 🌿 during the first full cycle of observation (to facilitate learning)
- 🌿 during menstruation (if there is only minimal bleeding, ensure there is no mucus)
- 🌿 at the very first sign of any mucus until the fourth day after the peak.

For couples avoiding pregnancy, note that the mucus-only methods recommend that intercourse take place in the evenings between menstruation and the first sign of mucus, and should be followed by one day of abstinence, so as not to miss the beginning of mucus.

A recent variation of the mucus-only methods is called the *TwoDay Method*. It is simpler but not as precise. For more details see: www.irh.org/twoday-method/

The focus on one sign only (mucus) distinguishes the Cervical Mucus Methods from the Symptothermal Method.

6. Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM)

LAM is a temporary natural family planning method for use postpartum, when breastfeeding. LAM is 98% effective if three criteria are simultaneously and strictly met*:

- a. Exclusive breastfeeding, on demand, day and night
 - 4/6 rule
 - 🍃 No more than 4-hour interval between feedings in the day
 - 🍃 No more than 6-hour interval between feedings at night
- b. No bleeding after 8 weeks postpartum
- c. Baby less than 6 months old

* Each of these criteria includes certain exceptions that require precise explanations. Before using LAM, we recommend that you contact a Serena teacher-couple who can provide you with more detailed information. In addition, if circumstances cause a break in one of the conditions just mentioned, Serena's expertise and guidance can help you determine if LAM can continue to be effective.

7. The Symptothermal Method

Serena teaches the Symptothermal Method. It involves temperature taking as well as probability calculations and noting cyclical symptoms indicating fertility, such as mucus and cervical changes. The details of each cycle are noted daily on a specialized Serena chart. The temperature is taken first thing in the morning, after at least one hour of total rest and is recorded on the chart at any point in the day. The cyclical symptoms of fertility, especially mucus observation, are noted at the end of the day. Serena recommends that the man assist by recording the temperature on the charts so that he is involved and aware of each cycle.

Close observation of her menstrual cycle will give any woman a better understanding of herself. The charted

information gives an image of the internal action of the sexual hormones. It also confirms if ovulation occurs in each cycle, and when.

Knowledge gained through menstrual cycle observation is used by the couple to discern their family planning goals and adapt their sexual behavior as a result. For couples experiencing difficulty becoming pregnant, the chart can help them determine the time of maximum fertility when intercourse will have the greatest chance of achieving conception.

Serena recommends that couples contact a certified Serena Teacher-Couple for formal teaching. Both men and women receive the training, which deepens understanding of the basics of fertility awareness. Charting encourages cooperation and sharing within the couple. In addition, follow-up consultation is available during the learning period and whenever there is a change in the cycles, or in the couple's situation or family planning goals.

8. Using the Symptothermal Method

The woman's temperature is taken every morning upon awakening. The temperatures stay at a lower level for the first several days after menstruation. After ovulation occurs, the hormone progesterone will act in the body to raise the temperature. The woman's temperature will shift upwards noticeably and remain higher until her next menstrual period begins, about two weeks later.

The most important cyclical symptom is the discharge of mucus from the cervix, which drains to the outside of the vagina (vulva). Both the sensation and appearance of the mucus are noted on the Serena chart. As mentioned earlier there is a cyclical pattern to the mucus. The woman is most fertile when it becomes very lubricated and thready.

Other cyclical symptoms can also be noted on the Serena charts. The cervix undergoes gradual changes as the estrogen level increases before ovulation: it rises, opens, becomes softer, and straightens out. Later, after ovulation, it lowers again, closes, becomes firmer, and tilts rapidly due to progesterone. Meanwhile the vulva becomes dry and the morning temperature rises to its higher level.

Self-examination of the cervix is an optional addition to the basic Symptothermal Method. After instruction from Serena, women learn to carefully examine their own cervix to detect its changes. It is recommended that hands are thoroughly washed just before the palpation, and fingernails are cut short. Serena recommends this observation be done at night immediately after the mucus at the vulva has been charted.

Couples wishing to conceive should focus on the mucus and other cyclical symptoms to help determine when they are most fertile and most likely to conceive. The woman should watch for the sensation of wetness and lubrication as well as the appearance of thready and transparent mucus. Meanwhile the cervix will be high, open, soft and straight. At the time of maximum fertility, the mucus produced is very receptive to sperm, and the cervix is in the optimum condition to allow sperm to travel to the ovum.

Couples that didn't receive a Symptothermal teaching are often under the false impression that when the temperature has risen, they are most fertile. In fact, the temperature rises after ovulation has already occurred. Therefore, they should not use the temperature as their guide. They should time intercourse based on the appearance of fertile-type mucus, which occurs prior to the rise in temperature.

To avoid conception couples must abstain from all genital contact during the fertile time. The Symptothermal Method rules inform us about the few relatively infertile days in the beginning of the cycle that usually occur before the fertile

window. Another rule confirms that the couple is definitely infertile in the post-ovulatory phase, when the temperature taken in normal conditions has stabilized at its higher level and when all other signs of fertility (especially mucus) have disappeared for at least three days.

According to Serena teaching, the couple can then resume intercourse until the fertile symptoms return during the next cycle. After 3-6 cycles of experience, the couple can even stop charting until the next cycle starts – as long as ovulatory signs are clearly identified and the post-ovulatory/infertile phase is confirmed.

The first days of the cycle provide a period of relative infertility, which many couples decide to use. Serena rules help determine the length of this period by considering the first signs of fertility as well as a calculation based on the exact lengths of past cycles.

The fertility window is approximately 10 days during the menstrual cycle.

The Symptothermal Method is reliable for women who have cycles of variable lengths. For situations such as breastfeeding after childbirth, or during perimenopause, Serena has developed specific charts. Couples should consult Serena teacher-couples for further information.

The charting and interpretation routine becomes quick and easy once couples have received the basic training and follow-up support from Serena. Taking and recording daily temperatures on the chart, along with noting fertility symptoms at the end of the day takes less than 2 minutes.

The fact that information on fertility / infertility is derived from various body signs gives helpful points of reference. Observing an objective sign, like the temperature, gives the male partner an opportunity to become directly involved in




family planning. Serena encourages both members of the couple to become involved in taking responsibility for their fertility. The man can note the temperature on the chart, while the woman notes, or informs him about her more subjective fertility signs. In this way both partners refer to the chart regularly and know if they are fertile or not. They can then make the decision together if they wish to achieve or avoid a pregnancy.

Serena stresses the importance of receiving comprehensive, quality training and support materials from certified teachers.

9. Effectiveness of Modern Natural Family Planning

The statistics in *Contraceptive Technology* (21st Edition), by Hatcher *et al.*, New York: Ayer Company Publishers, 2018, page 100 show the following information:

“Percentage of Women Experiencing an Unintended Pregnancy within the First Year of Perfect Use”

 TwoDay Method	4
 Ovulation Method	3
 Symptothermal Method	0.4

Studies have shown that, once the couple has benefited from competent teaching, the key factor which makes natural family planning work well is the motivation of the couple.

If they are willing to learn and adhere to the rules, then natural family planning will serve them well throughout all phases of their fertile life.

10. Advantages of Natural Family Planning

Highly effective:

- 🌱 When learned and used properly it is ranked among the most effective methods of family planning.

Natural:

- 🌱 encourages and respects the natural processes
- 🌱 no risks to health, no harmful side effects or interventions

Inexpensive:

- 🌱 one-time fee for materials and teaching, only ongoing purchase is for charts

Simple to learn:

- 🌱 based on natural, observable changes

Reversible:

- 🌱 can be used at any time to plan or avoid pregnancy, without a waiting period

Life-long use:

- 🌱 can be used in all phases of life (including breastfeeding and perimenopause)

Empowerment:

- 🌱 provides greater self-awareness and independence
- 🌱 physical and psychological influence of cyclical hormones can be identified
- 🌱 self-confidence is developed making it easier to adapt when changes occur

Relationship building:

- 🌱 fosters positive communication in the couple, deepens intimacy
- 🌱 the man learns about the woman's physical and hormonal changes including her cyclical fertility
- 🌱 both members of the couple have to agree, not only in the initial choice of the method, but in its ongoing use
- 🌱 when fully integrated the method calls for constant dialogue within the couple - a bonus for their relationship.

11. Criteria for Choosing a Method of Family Planning

When deciding what method of family planning is best for them, what should couples consider before making their choice?

- ✔ Effectiveness: How well does the method work?
- ✔ Side Effects or Health Risks: To user? To offspring?
- ✔ Reversibility and Permanence: When we do want a pregnancy? Will the choice made now mean a delay or make it impossible later on?
- ✔ Acceptability and Morality: Is this choice acceptable to me and my partner and our value systems? How does the method work and who is going to be using it?
- ✔ Cost: Are there hidden or ongoing costs?
- ✔ Availability: Where to get information or devices?
- ✔ Discipline required: What do I have to do to make it work?
- ✔ Effects on spontaneity and coitus: Are they acceptable?
- ✔ Effects on relationship: Who is taking the responsibility/risks?
- ✔ Effects on the environment

Choosing a method of family planning is not a decision to be made lightly. It can have far-reaching effects on the couple's relationship and future fertility. Natural methods are often an overlooked option.

Serena hopes this brief overview helps to clarify the way natural family planning works, and how it can be a lifelong way for couples to manage their fertility safely, effectively, and as a positive force in their relationship.

12. Choosing an App on your Smartphone to Track your Cycles

Although applications for smartphones can be useful for recording all your signs, Serena recommends learning the Symptothermal method rules beforehand. This will enable you to interpret your fertile and infertile signs on your own. Start with pen and paper before relying on the data recorded on an app.

At this time, Serena does not recommend any specific app to track your cycle. If you use one, choose an app that allows you to turn off the algorithm feature because Serena rules are more reliable. Ideally, the chosen app allows synchronizing with your partner's smartphone.

Visit the following websites for information on applications:
naturalwomanhood.org/how-do-you-pick-a-fertility-app-that-really-works
www.factsaboutfertility.org

Serena does provide charting online on its website: serena.ca/chart

The user is responsible to interpret the charts according to Serena rules.

13. Further Information

The best way to learn the Symptothermal Method is in a face-to-face in a private session, in a group/public session or on-line meeting using screen sharing with a certified teacher-couple.

Serena can offer you:

- instruction on a couple to couple basis, by certified teacher couples who use the Symptothermal Method
- instruction on using the Symptothermal Method to avoid or space pregnancies
- instruction on using the Symptothermal Method to achieve a pregnancy
- after childbirth information on natural methods such as the Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM) or the Symptothermal Method
- using the Symptothermal Method during perimenopause
- follow-up support and assistance in chart interpretation

distance learning online if you live in an area where no teacher couples are available

You can also contact the coordinator in your province to set up a session. Documentation is available in both official languages.

More About Serena

Serena is a family planning information service which:

- promotes an understanding of fertility awareness by teaching the Symptothermal Method
- encourages couple decision-making in a loving dialogue
- values human life from conception.

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