

## **Are younger women at a disadvantage in using fertility awareness-based methods of family planning?**

Women age 24 and younger are at the peak of their fertility. Does this put them at a disadvantage when it comes to the use of fertility awareness-based methods of family planning?

Fertility awareness-based methods of family planning help women identify the days each cycle when they are most likely to become pregnant. If they wish to avoid pregnancy they do not have unprotected sex on these days. The Standard Days Method and the TwoDay method are fertility awareness-based methods of family planning that use very different approaches to identify the fertile days. Both methods were developed by the Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University, to meet the needs of women for simple, accurate ways to recognize when they need to avoid unprotected intercourse if they want to prevent pregnancy.

An efficacy trial of the Standard Days Method, following 478 women for up to 13 cycles of method use in five sites in Bolivia, Peru, and the Philippines, resulted in a 4.8 one-year pregnancy rate with self-reported correct use of the method. A one-year pregnancy rate of 12 was calculated when taking into account all cycles and all pregnancies, including cycles in which users had unprotected intercourse on days identified as fertile (Arévalo et al., 2002). An efficacy trial of the TwoDay Method in Guatemala, Peru, and the Philippines was recently completed. Results are under embargo until published, but we can say that the method is very efficacious. Only women in union, ages 18-39, were admitted to the studies.

In this presentation we analyze data from both efficacy studies to determine if young women use the methods differently than older women, and explore the possibility

that they are at a higher risk of pregnancy when using fertility awareness-based methods because they are in their peak fertility years. Some 23% of participants in the two studies were age 24 and younger. They contributed 30% of pregnancies, but this difference is not statistically significant. Younger women have had less experience with other family planning methods before they participated in the efficacy studies – The Standard Days Method and TwoDay Method were the first family planning method for 30% of young study participants.

The Standard Days Method requires that women avoid unprotected intercourse on days 8-19 of the cycle – 12 days each cycle. The TwoDay Method requires that women avoid unprotected intercourse on days in which they notice cervical secretions on that day or the day before – an average of 12 days each cycle. The methods do not require complete abstinence from sex. Use of a barrier method during the days the method identifies as fertile is acceptable. However, to facilitate the study of method efficacy, study participants were asked to take this a step further and avoid sex altogether during these days.

Not surprisingly, we found that coital frequency of the younger women was significantly higher (mean 6.2 days with intercourse per cycle) than older women (mean 5.4). Younger women had intercourse in their fertile days more than older women, but this difference is not statistically different. However, a smaller proportion of younger women (18%) had unprotected intercourse on the fertile days than older women (25%), and this difference is statistically significant (at the 0.05 level). Thus, younger women have more intercourse, and they have it more in their fertile days, but they also use backup protection on those days more than older women.

We discovered that most young women found their method very acceptable. Our findings suggest that younger women in the peak years of fertility, can use the Standard Days Method and the TwoDay Method correctly and effectively. They are not at a disadvantage when it comes to using fertility awareness-based methods. These methods can be particularly useful for young women who wish to have another child in the future, and who fear that hormonal contraceptives may interfere with their future fertility. They can also use the Standard Days Method and the TwoDay Method to plan and achieve a pregnancy when they wish to have another child. These methods can be a valuable addition to the services that reproductive health and other programs can offer young women.

#### *Reference*

Arévalo M., Jennings V. and Sinai I. (2002). "Efficacy of a new method of family planning: the Standard Days Method." *Contraception* 65:333-338.