

## **It's all in the timing: Coital frequency and 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 prevent pregnancy they avoid unprotected intercourse on these days. Users of fertility awareness-based methods should not have unprotected sex whenever they wish, because for a part of each cycle they have to avoid intercourse or use a barrier method if they want to prevent pregnancy. To determine the frequency and timing during the cycle when users of these methods had intercourse, we examine coital logs from efficacy studies of two fertility awareness-based methods of family planning – the Standard Days Method and the TwoDay Method. Our findings show that contrary to popular belief, users of fertility awareness-based methods of family planning do not have sex less than users of other family planning methods.

The Standard Days Method identifies days 8-19 of the cycle (inclusive) as the fertile days for every user in every cycle. By definition, the fertile period for Standard Days Method users is 12 days each cycle. It works best for women with cycles that usually range between 26 and 32 days. It is often used with a string of color-coded beads designed to help users keep track of which cycle day they are on and to monitor their cycle length.

The TwoDay Method uses a very different approach to identify the fertile days of the cycle. Users of the TwoDay Method monitor each day the presence or absence of cervical secretions (of any type) by sensation or observation. Users follow a simple algorithm to determine whether they should consider themselves fertile and avoid

unprotected sex on any given day. Each day a user asks herself two simple questions: (a) Did I note secretions today? and (b) Did I note secretions yesterday? If she answers ‘yes’ to *either* of these questions, she should consider herself fertile on that day. If she answers ‘no’ to *both* questions, she is probably not fertile. The period the TwoDay Method identifies as fertile is variable (mean 12 days).

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 pregnancies, including those which occurred in cycles in which users had unprotected intercourse on days identified as fertile (Arévalo et al., 2002). An efficacy trial of the TwoDay Method was recently completed, following 450 women in 5 sites in Guatemala, Peru, and the Philippines. Results are under embargo until published, but we can say that the method is very efficacious.

The Standard Days Method and the TwoDay Method do not require sexual abstinence on the days the methods identify as fertile. They simply help the couple recognize the fertile window, so that they can choose to use a barrier method or avoid sex on these days. However, to facilitate the study of method efficacy, participants were asked to avoid intercourse altogether during the fertile days during the efficacy studies. They were also asked to report if they did have sex during the fertile days – with or without another method as backup protection.

Participants in both efficacy studies contributed up to 13 cycles of method use. In each cycle they completed a coital log, where they marked each day if they had

intercourse or not, and if they used a backup method. The two studies were carried out with varied populations in different sites throughout the world.

Our results show that coital frequency was virtually the same in the two studies – a mean of 5.5 reported days with intercourse per cycle in the Standard Days Method study, and 5.6 days in the TwoDay Method study. This compares very well with the DHS data of 5.5 acts of intercourse per month reported for all sexually active married women in 27 countries throughout the world (Stover et al., 2001).

In our presentation we will show patterns of reported days with intercourse throughout the cycle, relative to menstruation and the identified fertile days. We then explore strategies employed by participants to cope with the study requirement of having no intercourse during the fertile period. We discovered three broad types of strategies: (1) separation strategies, (2) use of a barrier method or withdrawal as backup protection, and (3) alternative sex strategies. Separation strategies were by far the most common, and some were quite ingenious. Examples include sleeping in separate beds or in separate rooms or with a child between them, changing work schedules so as not to sleep at the same time, and travel.

### *References*

- Arévalo M., Jennings V. and Sinai I. (2002). “Efficacy of a new method of family planning: the Standard Days Method.” *Contraception* 65:333-338.
- Stover J., Bertrand J., Smith S., et al. (2001). *Empirically based conversion factors for calculating couple-years of protection*. North Carolina: Carolina Population Center, p. 32.

