

Fertility Awareness & Preventing Pregnancy

What is fertility?

- Fertility is a word describing the body's ability to produce children.
- For a body with a penis, fertility describes the production of sperm, which usually starts during puberty. Sperm is released from the body in semen (cum) during ejaculation. Once a body with a penis begins producing sperm, they are able to continue producing sperm for the rest of their life.
- For a body with a vagina, fertility describes the release of egg cells from the ovaries (ovulation) as part of the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle usually begins during puberty. A body with a vagina is born with eggs already inside the ovaries. Eggs continue to be released from the ovaries into the fallopian tubes as part of the menstrual cycle until the body enters menopause. Menopause marks the end of menstrual cycles and happens, on average, in someone's 40s or 50s.

What happens during the menstrual cycle?

- A menstrual cycle is the time from the first day of bleeding (period/moon time) to the day before the next period.
- 28 days often describes a typical cycle length, but cycles range from 23-35 days.
- Menstrual blood is the shedding of the lining of the uterus. This shedding (period/moon time) can last 3-5 days.
- After menstruation, levels of the hormone estrogen start to rise and make the uterine lining thicken. At the same time, an egg cell in one of the ovaries starts to mature.
- Hormones trigger the release of an egg from the ovary into the fallopian tube, a process called ovulation.
- The egg lives for about 24 hours after it is released. If it is fertilized by sperm, it will travel down the fallopian tube, into the uterus. If it attaches to the uterine wall, it becomes a pregnancy.
- Pregnancy is not possible if there is no egg cell or no sperm.
- Sperm can live in a vagina, fallopian tubes, and uterus for up to 5 days. This means a person can be fertile for about 5 days before ovulation and 24 hours after ovulation.
- Ovulation only occurs once per cycle, although 2 eggs may be released at a time.
- If the egg cell is not fertilized it will disintegrate, hormone levels will drop and the lining of the uterus will be shed, starting the cycle all over again.
- The time between Day 1 and ovulation can vary. The time from ovulation until bleeding is about 14 days.
- Everybody is different and cycles can vary slightly in length from one to the next.

What are signs of fertility for a body with a vagina?

A body provides different signals when it is fertile:

- Cervical mucus is produced in the cervix (the opening to the uterus) and comes out through the vagina. When a person is fertile, the mucus becomes wetter, slippery, and stretchy (like raw egg whites), which helps sperm to swim into the uterus towards the egg. People using hormonal birth control do not ovulate and therefore do not produce this cervical mucus.
- After ovulation, there is a small increase in body temperature.
- The cervix becomes softer, more open, and changes its angle when a person is fertile.

What are Fertility Awareness Methods (FAMs)?

Fertility Awareness Methods (FAMs) help people track their menstrual cycle to predict when they are fertile. If you are trying to prevent pregnancy, FAMs involve avoiding sperm in the vagina around the time of ovulation (e.g., using condoms or not having penis-vagina sex) or using another form of birth control (e.g., birth control pills) to stop ovulation. If you are trying to create a pregnancy, these methods may also be helpful and used to predict ovulation and fertile times.

Some examples of FAMs are:

- Justisse Method: Keeping a record (charting) of changes in cervical mucus and your body temperature, measured as soon as you wake up in the morning. For more information, visit www.justisse.ca.
- Weschler's FAM: Keeping a record of your changing cervical mucus and your waking body temperature. For more information, visit www.tcoyf.com.
- Standard Days Method: Tracking your cycle to predict fertility. It assumes the time of greatest fertility is between days 8-19.

How effective are FAMs?

- Rates vary with each type, ranging from 79%-98% effective when used consistently.

Advantages of FAMs:

- There are no physical side effects.
- You can use FAMs if you are unable or do not want to use other birth control methods.
- FAMs can be free. If you want to use beads or a special tracking chart, you may need to purchase those. Some people like to see a FAM consultant to help start the process, which also has financial costs.
- If you don't want to use a backup method of birth control during fertile times, you can use those times to explore other kinds of sex, such as oral sex, anal sex, mutual masturbation, etc.

Disadvantages of FAMs:

- Doing something every day (e.g., marking something down in a chart).
- If preventing pregnancy, you will have to use another method of birth control or avoid getting sperm in your vagina at certain times in your cycle.
- You may have to feel comfortable touching your vagina to gather and look at cervical mucus.
- Like many forms of birth control, FAMs do not protect from sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- These methods may not work if you do not have regular menstrual cycles.
- It can take time to learn and use FAM effectively.
- FAM consultants may be hard to find and can be expensive.

Where can I get more information?

- From your health care provider, community health clinic, or public health nurse. If you need a regular health care provider, call the Family Doctor Finder at 204-786-7111.
- From the Facts of Life Online: e-mail your questions to thefactsoflife@serc.mb.ca.
- From a Teen Clinic if you are 21 or younger.
- Online at www.serc.mb.ca or our youth website, www.teentalk.ca.