

NFP AND ME

ISSUE #3, SUMMER 2016

ADVANCES IN NFP

A new way to monitor hormones

I wrote about the possibility of this in my last newsletter, but now it seems we can say: Progesterone sticks are a GO! (well, almost).

You may have read about Dr. Beckley's new invention: the Ovulation Double-Check. Or maybe not. In either case, it's very exciting and here's why: unless

you have an ultrasound, it's incredibly difficult to pin down exactly when you are ovulating.

Mittelschmerz

(commonly known as "ovulation pain") may or may not coincide with your day of ovulation.

Temperatures can rise up to two days after ovulation. Mucus can remain "fertile" (S) for up to two days after ovulation. Then you have to wait at least three days (in most charting systems, four) until you can say that you are finally in phase 3 (post-ovulation, infertile) And your confidence in pinpointing phase 3 is determined

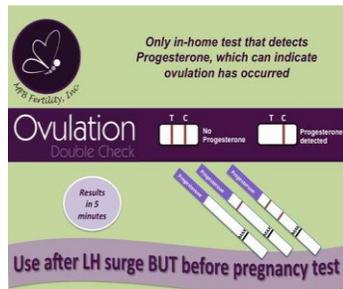
by how confident you are in your charting and signs. Quite frankly, it's a mess. It works, but it's a total mess.

Enter: Dr. Beckley! She has invented a simple urine test that will check for the hormone progesterone, commonly known as the "pregnancy hormone" which is

present after ovulation. By using a test to confirm the presence of progesterone, a woman can know if she has

already ovulated, which can be a huge dose of peace of mind. This is going to be a game-changer for NFP, but let's look at how it applies to certain situations:

(cont. on next page)



WELCOME!

This newsletter is distributed for users of the Boston Cross-Check Method of Natural Family Planning and others interested in general topics pertaining to NFP. If you would like to learn this method or have other questions, please contact me at: Summamommaop@gmail.com



And visit my website: summamomma.com!



- 1) **Trying to Conceive:** For couples who are trying to conceive, one of the worst parts can be feeling like sex is a chore. Trying to time your intercourse with fertile days and ensure high enough frequency over the course of many months can be exhausting and frustrating. A progesterone stick would allow couples to know for sure when that fertile window has ended, alleviating any pressure to “keep trying.” These tests can also be reassuring for women who are worried that they might not be ovulating.
- 2) **Trying to Postpone:** For couples who are trying to postpone, the simple fact remains that abstinence is hard. A stick that confirms ovulation can be a handy addition to any NFP toolkit, potentially decreasing the number of abstinence days. It can also serve as a handy “back-up” in case a monitor has missed a Peak reading, or you happened to miss some key temperature/mucus observation days.
- 3) **That Pesky Post-Partum Phase:** That’s right, ladies! Progesterone sticks could be a saving grace for anyone trying to make sense of the post-partum fog. While the Clear-Blue monitor has been a huge help, it also comes with a lot of quirks—including the possibility of “practice peaks” leading up to ovulation with returning fertility. Anyone who has had one of these “false” peaks post-partum knows that the waiting time can be torturous. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you didn’t have to go through the process of retriggering the monitor and waiting two weeks to be sure? I think so. Hooray!

But of course progesterone sticks still come with some caveats. Even though they can detect ovulation, there’s no way to know if you will have a second ovulation. Any method which incorporates these sticks will probably need to allow 24 hours of abstinence after a positive reading (for those trying to postpone), because that is the lifespan of an ovum. Additionally, methods would be wise to tack on another 24 hours in case of a double-ovulation (which always occurs within 24 hours of the first one). So you see, it’s not an immediate “green light,” but it is a great addition to our growing body of knowledge!

Currently, the Ovulation Double-Check is still in production. Thanks to generous supporters, they have raised enough on their Indiegogo account! Visit their page to find out more about ordering, or to try a sample:
<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/at-home-ovulation-double-check-test#/>

RULE REFRESHER: CERVICAL FLUID

Cervical fluid becomes more stretchy, slippery/wet and clear as estrogen increases leading up to ovulation. If you are using cervical fluid as a sign, be sure to ask yourself: “what do I see?” and “what do I feel?” each time you make an observation. Checks should be done at least three times throughout the day, including right before bed, which is when you will record your cervical fluid sign. The MOST FERTILE observation of the day is what you put down on your chart, regardless of when that observation occurred.

If you are having trouble getting a good observation, you can try checking after a bowel movement –OR– by doing an internal check at the tip of the cervix.

THEOLOGY CORNER: NFP MAKES WARRIOR WOMEN

(AND MEN)

I don't know about you, but I love watching the Olympics. Just knowing that God built the human body to perform such amazing, graceful and grueling tasks is a wonder in itself:



that anyone would train so hard and dedicate so much of their life to pushing their bodies to these extremes is totally beyond me. If you've been watching in Rio, you'll know that Michael Phelps has been the center of a lot of attention. At the age of 31 (a total geezer by Olympian standards), he is not only still competing on the world stage, he is better than ever. The secret to his success? Training. Lots of training, coupled with a renewed sense of purpose, something he attributed to the intervention of long-time friend Ray Lewis and a little book called "The Purpose-Driven Life." This combination of pure talent, perseverance in training and a *reason* to persevere all make Michael Phelps arguably the best Olympic athlete of all time.

In the ancient world (the world of the first Olympiad!), athletes were lauded not only as individual victors; they were celebrated as heroes of their entire families and city-states. The honor they won for themselves translated to honor for all. It is no wonder, then, that the warrior (the practical profession for an athlete) was lauded by Homer as the exemplar of virtue: to put it

simply, the warrior was the greatest specimen of mankind. This is because the warrior-athlete not only relies on his natural talents, but he commits himself to training—to the cultivation of perfection. This training was called *askesis*, in the Greek, and was picked up in very interesting ways by the early Christian Church.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul writes:

"Therefore, I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it a slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." (1 Cor 9:26-27)

Here, Paul likens his Christian life to that of an athlete, who not only coaches others (through preaching), but also disciplines his own body so that *he* can emerge victorious in the test. He uses this metaphor again when he writes to Timothy towards the end of his life, saying, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Tim 4:7) Just as the athlete trains and then tests his preparation in a boxing match or in a race, the Christian trains body and soul and then is tested through the practice of the faith.

It is no coincidence that the martyrs, sent to horrific deaths in the Colosseum, were seen as the "athletes of religion" (Eusebius, Church History, Book V), those who sacrificed the most to win the greatest victory for Christ and the Church. This is the origin of the symbolism of the laurel, or crown, for martyrs—it is the same accolade given to the triumphant athlete/warrior. Following the lines of St. Paul,

Eusebius and others, Christians began to see themselves as God's warriors, and thus their entire life was a *practice of training* both body and soul to be victorious in the battle for heaven.

This *askesis* was driven by Christ's challenge: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mt 16:24)

Those like Anthony of the Desert (St. Anthony the Great) who lived as hermits were the greatest examples of this *askesis*, putting their bodies through extreme fasting and abstinence while strengthening their souls through prayer. This is the origin of the word asceticism, which has the unfortunate connotation today of complete austerity. In reality, asceticism is anything we do which perfects us in Christian virtue, which is simply another way of saying: we become more Christ-like, and consequently more fully ourselves.

One of the main hurdles we encounter as practitioners of NFP, and perhaps the most difficult point to address when we try to explain ourselves to others, is the fact that natural family planning requires abstinence, plain and simple. It requires a mastery of our bodies that few people have any interest in today. Such self-denial seems totally alien in a world that champions sex-on-demand, especially within marriage. This peculiar form of fasting is even a sticking point for those within the Church, who may see value in other traditional forms of *askesis*, but can't see the value in this particular form. What makes NFP so strange and challenging is precisely the fact that it is often explained in the context of "withholding" some good in order to postpone another good. More precisely: we

withhold the good of sex, in order to postpone the good of a child—because naturally, these things go together. But if that is the only way that abstinence in



MARTYRDOM OF ST. CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA, BY RENI GUIDO

NFP is understood, what's the point? Michael Phelps wouldn't put himself on a restrictive diet in order to NOT win medals, right? So if NFP is a true form of *askesis*, that is—training in perfection (virtue) for the sake of Christ, it has to be something much more than abstaining from a good in order to **withhold another good**. Rather, it must be abstaining from a good in order to **achieve a good**. But what "good" is that?

I would like to put forward the idea that NFP is a true form of *askesis*, not just because it can require the mastery-of-self which is needed to abstain during fertile periods, (or to "hold it" as you dance around the bathroom trying to get that darned test stick unwrapped!) but because regardless of how and why you are using NFP, it trains and perfects us in the Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance. When we focus our sights on the goal of becoming more Christ-like, NFP can be a powerful source of *askesis*, training us to be the "athletes of religion" God wants us to be. Let's see how:

Prudence: allows us to judge what is right and wrong—and do it. It is "right reason applied to practice." In the case of a couple trying to discern whether now is a good time to have a baby, they must weigh the good of a new baby against the other which may be affected by their decision, e.g. the mother's health, the needs of current children, dangerous family circumstances. Here is where the idea of "withholding

a good in order to postpone another good” breaks down, because now we see that the decision to abstain during fertile periods is a decision to withhold the good of sex not for the potential, future good of a baby, but for the sake of maintaining some *current good*. The practice of NFP, specifically in the discernment process couples undergo, hones the virtue of prudence.

Justice: trains us to give to each what properly belongs to them. In NFP it is connected with prudence because it requires us to acknowledge and act upon the distinction between current/actual and future/potential goods. As we said before, a baby is a “good,” but in the discerning phase, it is a *potential* good, not yet actualized (realized). Our spouse and any children we already have are *actual goods* and justice ensures that we put the needs of our *actual* family members ahead of the needs of *potential* family members. It is possible that the needs of all these people could be met, in which case it is probably a good idea to try to have another baby, but it is also possible that they can conflict. When combined with prudence, justice is a powerful virtue strengthened through NFP. Together, they allow us to weigh competing goods, discern what is just concerning those goods, and act upon that reasoning.

Fortitude: allows us to remain steadfast to our duty in the face of hardship. For most of us, NFP forces us to practice fortitude every time we enter into conversation with a health-care professional. Or we may encounter pushback from family and friends. Perhaps the hardship is the silent suffering of a couple trying to conceive—or those months when the chart simply doesn’t make any sense and you’re ready to throw in the towel. Remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church in regards to family planning

is quite frequently an exercise of fortitude. It sucks, but no one will ever tell you that *askesis* is easy.

Temperance: allows us to balance the pursuit of legitimate goods against any inordinate desire for them. As fourth in the list of cardinal virtues, temperance is seen as handmaid to them all. In order for prudence, justice and fortitude to prevail, our own desires must first be moderated. NFP requires the practice of temperance not only in the sense of moderating our sexual appetites, but also fosters modesty of spirit, the humility that is required to wipe out pride and selfishness. Whether we are trying to postpone or trying to achieve pregnancy, temperance allows us not to fall into despair when our carefully-crafted plans are frustrated. It preserves us from corrupted love towards any good we seek: whether potential or actual.

We could also highlight the ways in which NFP strengthens us in the Theological Virtues of faith, hope and love, but since this article is already too long, I will end with the exhortation to embrace this cross, this peculiar form of *askesis*, with an eye towards allowing all of this hard work to make you more like Christ. This is one of the many ways in which God invites us into “perfection training,” paving the way for us to “become perfect, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48) No saint was ever called to be a mediocre version of themselves. It is true that the image of the athlete-warrior is an imperfect metaphor, but I believe we can glean some true insight by heeding the words of the greatest Olympian, Michael Phelps:

“If you want to be the best, you have to do things that other people aren’t willing to do.”

Onward, Christian warriors!

Do you have friends who might be open to NFP but you're not sure how to start the conversation?

Is it difficult to find other women to talk to about NFP?

Could your parish benefit from you being a point-person for others to ask about NFP?

I'd like to start a Google/Facebook Group for us:

*Even if you aren't a trained NFP teacher, **the Church needs you** to spread the Good (and challenging) News of NFP so that we can build a community of support for one another! E-mail me if you'd like to join an NFP Support Group that would equip you to answer basic questions about NFP for others.*

No couple should feel they are alone.