

Taking Charge of Your Fertility

Using the FAM method as an aid to pregnancy achievement.

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I began charting my cycles after finding Toni Weschler's book "Taking Charge of your Fertility" some 17 years ago. At the time I was using the method as birth control and loving my new found understanding of my body.

I was so inspired I went on to teach women about their menstrual cycles and how to use this method in order to become pregnant. Nowadays I combine FAM (Fertility Awareness Method) with Acupuncture and Chinese medicine to help couples have children.

Charting can help you in a number of different ways. It can clarify if and when you are ovulating, where you are in your cycle and allow you to plan love making during the most opportune moments—when you are most fertile. It can also shed light on other aspects of your cycle such as whether you have a long follicular phase, a short luteal phase or if your progesterone levels are weak. All these things help us as practitioners hone in on the specific hormone imbalances and help guide our treatment approach.

Learning about your body's reproductive physiology is profoundly empowering and helps debunk some common myths such as ovulation occurs on day 14. This is true for many women but certainly not for all and if you are trying to get pregnant and you are a woman with a longer cycle than the average 28 days this bit of misinformation can be causing you to miss time love making and thus not conceive.

Unlike men who can father children at any time, women are only fertile a few days of each cycle. Once ovulation has occurred and the egg has been released it will stay viable for about 24 hours. The sperm can stay alive anywhere from 3–5 days especially in the presence of fertile cervical fluid. The follicular phase or pre ovulatory phase is mostly governed by estrogen. This stimulates the lining of the uterus to thicken and ripen the dominant follicle in preparation for ovulation. Once the egg has been released, the corpus luteum begins to secrete progesterone which causes a very noticeable increase in your body temperature. The second part of your cycle, post ovulation is governed by progesterone which acts like an incubator in preparation for possible fertilization and implantation of the egg. If this does not occur, progesterone levels plummet, the endometrial lining sloughs off and the period comes.

The FAM method advocates observing the body's 3 most important signs of fertility.

1. BBT (Basal body temperature)
2. Cervical Fluid
3. Cervical position

Basal Body Temperature

Take your temperature first thing upon waking before you even uncover yourself and be consistent with the time within an hour. If you are waking several hours earlier or later in a week, take your temperature and make note of the discrepancy on the chart. There are several factors that will increase your waking temperature and should be noted such as having a fever, drinking alcohol the night before, getting less than 3 consecutive hours of sleep and taking it at a substantially different time than usual. Temperatures rise by one-tenth of a degree every half hour.

In order to help you see 'the forest through the trees' it is very useful to draw a cover line on your chart. This will help you differentiate between the pre-ovulatory temperatures and the post ovulatory temps.

1. After your period ends and you are charting your temperatures make note of the highest of the previous 6 days.
2. Identify the first day your temperature rises at least two-tenths of a degree above that highest temperature.
3. Highlight the last 6 temperatures before the rise.
4. Draw the cover line one-tenth of a degree above the highest of that cluster of highlighted temperatures. (The period temperatures are not to be factored in as the residual progesterone in the system makes it common to have higher temperatures during menses.)

Cervical Fluid

This sign is very important to observe daily as this will reveal (along with cervical position) impending ovulation. When you observe the thermal shift on your chart it is after ovulation has occurred and often too late for conception. **The best time to be having sex is the days you have fertile fluid leading up to ovulation.**

Some women only have one day of fertile mucous while others will have slippery fluid for several days. You will notice fluid going from absent to scant, sticky to more creamy and white and then changing to clear and stretchy like egg whites as you move towards ovulation.

Be sure to check throughout the day and focus on vaginal sensations throughout the day as well i.e. (dry, sticky, wet). You can start checking the day after menstruation has ended and record it on your chart.

Once you have learned to chart your cervical fluid, it is time to determine your most "fertile day". Weschler refers to this as your peak day. This is the day you have the greatest quantity of cervical fluid before your thermal shift. Keep in mind this will only be known with certainty in retrospect, after your cervical fluid has begun to dry up. Once you get to know your own body's pattern you will be able to go forward with more confidence in the next cycle.

Cervical Position

The cervix is the bottom part of a woman's uterus that protrudes into the vaginal canal. As you approach ovulation your cervix will change in a number of ways including becoming softer, higher, more open, and wetter. Toni Weschler uses the acronym SHOW to describe these changes. At all other times in your cycle the tip of your cervix is firm like the tip of your nose and closed, it will be low in the vagina and not particularly wet.

This is considered an optional sign but I find it quite helpful when the other signs are a bit confusing during any particular part of the cycle. In order to check your cervix it is helpful to either squat or put one leg up on the tub, some women prefer to check while sitting on the toilet. Use whichever position you prefer but keep it consistent. Once you have washed your hands, insert your middle finger into your vagina and observe:

- a. Softness (firm, medium, or soft)
- b. Height in the vagina (low, midway, or high)
- c. Opening (closed, partly open, or open)
- d. Wetness (nothing, sticky, creamy, or slippery egg white)

Make sure you record what you have observed on your chart.

We encourage you to bring your chart in monthly so we can photocopy it for your file. At this time we can go over the chart with you and answer any questions you may have.

My intention for this article was to distil the information to its essence, to enable you to begin charting and observing your body's signs as you move through your cycle. Although simple, there are rules to follow and understand to make this method work best and give you the greatest chance of success.

Look for our Fully Fertile Lecture Series in the early months of 2012, one of the topics will be charting for fertility. We will take you through step by step how to chart and everything you need to know to make this tool work for you.