

Ethics in Family Planning

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Ethics in Family Planning

Dr. Nolan Byler

December, 2002

In Genesis 1:27, 28 we read, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

God makes it clear in these verses that He created each person for a purpose.

Genesis 2:7 says, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

Every person has a living soul. Every person is important and sacred in the eyes of God. We can’t lose sight of that fact. It is foundational for the subject being addressed.

The family is God’s way of replenishing the earth. We can make a few deductions from verse 28. Replenish means to make full or complete again. If you have no children or only one child, you haven’t replenished yourselves. At least two children are needed to fulfill that command.

God also said to multiply. When you multiply, things get bigger. From the context, I conclude God was talking about multiply-

ing by two, three, four, etc., which would mean four, six, eight, etc., children. However, at times physical factors prevent couples from having children. I understand that. Praise the Lord that He has blessed my wife and me with nine treasures from the Lord. They are a tremendous blessing.

The text above also asks us to be fruitful. Suppose you planted two seeds of corn in your garden. Then after a few months of hoeing, weeding, fertilizing and watering, your harvest yielded two seeds. Would that be worth it? No, you expect to see a whole ear full. You want those seeds to be fruitful. Likewise, God wants couples to be fruitful. That is what He commanded us to do from the beginning. God hasn't changed and His command still stands—not necessarily thirty-fold, sixty-fold or one hundred-fold as the Bible talks about in the parable of the good soil. One man that certainly followed God's command to be fruitful was Gideon. He had seventy sons, but unfortunately, he had many wives. We don't want to follow that example. At the same time, it is the responsibility of parents to space their children at least somewhat to allow for proper training of each one.

If we follow what the Bible says, I can't imagine God being pleased when we selfishly limit our families to one or two children. God doesn't accept excuses such as: "I want to have my career"; "I don't want any 'nuisances' around"; "I don't want to put all the money into them"; etc. Yet, that's the kind of thing I hear occasionally. It is obvious to me that many Christian families have succumbed to the pressures of the world to limit their families. The ideal family is not father, mother, one son, and one daughter as the world would have us believe. When you see a family logo, you see a man, a woman, a boy, and a girl. You don't see four boys and four girls. Unfortunately, this "ideal family" often ends up having two spoiled children. When God brings together a Christian man and a Christian woman and makes them one flesh, He wants them

to produce more godly people. Who is in a better position to raise children that can be “salt and light” in the earth than a Christian couple? Sometimes couples say, “We don’t want to bring children into this evil world.” God put us here for a purpose; He wants us to be salt and light. We need more children, not less, to help combat the evil. Let’s take up the challenge.

Psalm 127:3, 4 state, “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.”

God is very interested in blessing Christian couples with children. Worldly philosophy says children are a nuisance; they’re too costly. You see figures of how many hundreds of thousands of dollars it’s going to cost to raise one child. It doesn’t need to cost that much; but that is what the world would like us to believe. Some say we need to severely limit our families to avoid overcrowding in the world. God told us to be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and He’s going to take care of the family that he gives us. True, there are more people than ever in this world—over six billion. Yet, if you would distribute the available food properly, there would be plenty for everybody. It’s because of the evil in this world that food isn’t distributed properly. The world overuses birth control. They kill millions of unborn babies. They try to get rid of unwanted children. They have an antichild philosophy that sees children as a liability instead of a blessing. That is wrong!

We, however, must use sound judgment and moderation in planning our families. We realize there is a tremendous responsibility that accompanies each child given to us. Husband and wife share that responsibility. Hence we have the need for this topic on ethics in family planning.

To address the topic, I will need to talk about contraception and how it relates to family planning. Contraception simply means prevention of conception or prevention of pregnancy by natural

or artificial means. There is no Scripture that specifies Christians are to use birth control. However, there are Scriptural principles that would point to moderation and responsibility in planning a family.

Opinions vary widely on the subject of contraception, both within the medical community and among Christians. The range goes from using only breast feeding, which is a natural contraceptive, to the tying of the tubes after one or two children. I will discuss the pros and cons of the different methods of contraception.

One of the reasons I was asked to give this presentation was to help couples be better informed in areas that many doctors do not inform them. For instance, doctors don't tell their patients about everything that happens during conception and implantation of a new pregnancy. They don't inform patients of the dangers to their unborn children. Second, I trust it may better some husband and wife relationship. Third, I hope to help someone realize they were ignorantly doing something wrong and they will discontinue the practice. Last, we want to emphasize the blessedness and the responsibility of having children. May God be honored and glorified through this presentation.

First, I want to establish the Biblical fact that sexual relationships between husband and wife are not just for procreation. They are also for pleasure and for the expression of intimate love between husband and wife. I Corinthians 7:2-5 says, "Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come

together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.”

There are four principles I’d like to consider from these verses. First, verses 2 and 3 point out that both husband and wife have sexual needs and drives. That is normal. God created us that way. Those drives should be fulfilled only in marriage. Our passage says “to avoid fornication,” let there be husband and wife.

Second, it says in verse 4 that when one marries, he or she is forfeiting control of their own body to their mate. It says, “The wife hath not power over her own body, but the husband:” and vice versa. In marriage they become one flesh.

Third, according to verse 5, we conclude both partners are obligated to meet their mate’s sexual needs. It says, “defraud not.” Defraud means to withhold or keep someone from something that is rightfully theirs. Therefore, if you are married, your wife rightfully has priority of your body and vice versa. Of course, you can agree to not meet each other’s needs for a time, as expressed in verse 5, to be able to concentrate on spiritual exercises.

Last, it is quite clear from the above passage that sexual relations in marriage are approved by God, not only for procreation, but also for pleasure and for showing of intimate love. Not only is sex a pleasure and a privilege within marriage, it is also a responsibility, because you are to give yourself to your mate. Obviously if sex was only for procreation, it would be sanctioned by God only once or twice a year, because for many couples one time will result in a pregnancy. Then there would be nine months where there should be no sexual relations because it could not result in a pregnancy if the wife is already pregnant. If the sexual act was only for procreation, there would be no need for verse 5 where it speaks about defrauding. Hebrews 13:4 would also bear this out. It says, “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” Clearly the physical relationship between man and wife is sanctioned and blessed by

God. It's the responsibility and privilege of a married couple.

Since the normal couple has sexual intercourse for the expression of love and pleasure more often than procreation, we need to think about contraception. To understand how that can be done, whether it's natural or artificial, we need to understand the menstrual cycle of the wife.

An adult woman has a menstrual period approximately every 28 days if she has a regular cycle. We time a cycle by calling the first day of menstruation Day 1. Menstruation usually lasts anywhere from 2 to 7 days after which the lining of the inside wall of the uterus starts growing and thickening, preparing for a possible implantation of a pregnancy. This is called the proliferative phase. (Fig. 1) Ovulation occurs about Day 14 in a regular 28 day cycle. This is the most likely time for a pregnancy to occur. If intercourse occurs close to that time, the sperm migrate through the uterus to the fallopian tubes where it may fertilize an egg that has been released into one of the tubes from an ovary. At the time of fertilization, a new life begins. It remains in the tube for up to six days after which it migrates out of the tube, down into the womb and implants on the inside wall of the womb. (Fig. 2) The last half of the cycle is called the secretory phase, where the lining of the womb now supports the new life that has been implanted. If there is no pregnancy, then there is no implantation, the lining of the womb sloughs off, and the cycle starts over.

With this groundwork laid, I want to address the ethics of family planning. (For those of you who are past planning a family, remember there are younger ones coming on and you have an obligation to share your knowledge with them.) As with any issue, it is wise to set some goals. It's important to know how you are going to nurture your children. Failure to plan for proper discipline and training can have disastrous affects for children. Likewise, it would be careless not to plan for how many children

you want and how they should be spaced. Young couples should think about these issues and come to some kind of an agreement very early in marriage.

I realize it is not God's will for all couples to have children. About 10% of Christian couples will be unable to conceive children. So if there's a church of 30 families, three of those families would typically be childless. Childless couples are often frustrated by their inability to conceive and need to learn to trust God with this problem. We should be willing to accept whatever God's will is for our families. We can plan what we want, but God has the final say. Failure to accept God's will can affect our entire life and limit our usefulness for God. God knows what is best. Perhaps for childless couples, adopting or caring for orphaned or rejected children may be God's plan.

At the same time, those who have children should be sensitive toward those who don't have children. Use caution when talking about your children if there is a childless couple in the group. Talk about other things. Don't keep hinting about it being time to start a family. That only drives the dagger of hurt a little deeper. Always show a loving and a caring attitude toward the childless couple.

On the other hand about 90% of couples can have children. There are some questions that should be asked when planning for a family. For example, how much time do we need to adjust to married life before we have our first child? Some couples are ready much sooner than others to have their first child. Some need more time to adjust to their roles as wife and husband before becoming a mother and father; others are ready right away. People say if you're old enough to get married, you're old enough to have children. Your body is certainly ready. Emotionally, you may have some maturing to do. However, it is wrong to selfishly not have children for the sake of the wife's career or things of that nature. We must not put our selfish pursuits ahead of God's will.

A second question to consider is how many children should we plan for? The answer to that question is often influenced by the number of children in our parents' families. It depends on how you relate to the family which you came from. If you came from a family of twelve children and thought that was way too many, you might want to limit your family to two or three. If, on the other hand you liked it, you may also want a lot of children. Many couples, whether they admit it or not, allow their peers to determine the number of children they have. That's looking to man for answers instead of God. What does *God* want for your family? There are many couples who have well laid plans for their family altered somewhat by God. If that happens to you, God has a few different ideas than you do. That's okay. The important thing is that you are always ready to accept what God's will is for you. I take care of a lot of pregnant ladies. I know there are times they've become pregnant when they weren't planning to and it was tough on them. I'm glad that the people I take care of, for the most part, will accept it. Christian families should not have unwanted children or "accidents". If there is a time when a child is not planned for, you should love that one just as much as any other child. Furthermore, that child shouldn't be reminded when they're older, 'Oh, you were an accident!' That is the worst thing you can do. Whatever the circumstances of their birth, children are a precious gift from God and should be accepted as such.

The third question we need to ask is how far apart should our children be? Some mothers can adjust quite quickly after having a baby and they're soon ready for another one. Others need time. Husbands need to be sensitive to their wives in this matter and exercise self-control. The Bible says that you "are to dwell with them according to knowledge." You need to understand their emotional condition, and respond accordingly.

Fourth, is birth control an ethical option? If so, are there some

birth control methods that are not acceptable for a Christian? I realize there are varying views about whether birth control is an ethical option, but in my 24 years of delivering babies and caring for families, I've noticed that almost every couple has some kind of birth control whether they admit it or not. I have cared for families that have limited themselves to one child. I also care for a family that has nineteen children. Oh, you say, they didn't practice any birth control. Wrong! They had three sets of twins and their children weren't every 11 months, maybe 15 months, but she breastfed which is natural birth control. There was a little bit of spacing, not a lot. Most of the families I care for have between 8 and 10 children or they will by the time they have completed their families. Again, moderation is the key.

Let's look at some specific methods of birth control. First, I will discuss some natural methods. Breast feeding is the most common method among plain people. When a mother is breast feeding, ovulation is usually suppressed so that she's not able to get pregnant during that time. That enables her to space her children one to two years apart. Breast feeding is a natural method of birth control God created and I see no problem with its use. I don't know of anyone who feels it is wrong.

The second method is called the rhythm method or periodic abstinence. This is accomplished by avoiding intercourse at the middle of each menstrual cycle near the time of ovulation when conception is most likely to occur. If this method is used, the couple needs to be careful to abstain from sexual relations for quite a large part of the cycle to make it effective. Even then, it is the least effective way to prevent pregnancy. Of course, the more days you abstain, the greater the effectiveness. Furthermore, it is very difficult to be successful if the wife's cycle is irregular, because that means it is unpredictable when she will ovulate. However, if this is the only method acceptable to the couple, it can be fairly

effective if strictly adhered to. Some couples become very good at recognizing signs of ovulation, such as increased cervical mucous or a rise in body temperature.

Let's look at a temperature chart. (Fig. 3) I recommend this for childless couples as well. When a couple can not have children it sometimes helps to find out when the wife is ovulating to increase the chances of conception taking place. This works for some couples. The wife takes her temperature each morning before getting up so there will be no exercise-induced rise in temperature. On the day of ovulation her body temperature should rise one half to one degree. That is the signal to either have sexual relations or avoid them, depending on the need of the couple.

There are some advantages to using this kind of approach. For one, it helps to foster some good communication between husband and wife. There must be good communication if it's going to work. You need to know where the wife is in her cycle. Instead of intercourse, you can develop alternate ways of expressing love and affection during times of abstinence. Another advantage with the rhythm method is the opportunity it gives to develop self-control.

The main difficulty with the rhythm method, beside the fact it's not always successful, is that it denies sexual fulfillment to the wife at the time of ovulation when she is most responsive sexually and has the greatest desire for sexual fulfillment. This is also the time the husband enjoys it the most since his wife is more responsive to him. Let's look again at those principles in I Corinthians 7:2-5 which were as follows: 1) Both husbands and wives have sexual needs and drives that should be fulfilled in marriage. 2) When one marries he forfeits the control of his body to his partner, they become one flesh. 3) Both partners have an obligation to meet their mate's sexual needs—even if it results in pregnancy. 4) The act of marriage is approved by God. Principle number three

is pretty hard to fulfill if rhythm is the only method of contraception used.

Certainly rhythm can be used as a way of spacing children for a time. However, when longer spacing is needed a couple may need something more effective. I have taken care of some mothers that after five years and five children, are just about worn out. They are exhausted. They come to me and say, "Is there anything we can do to slow this down?" One lady had a set of twins for her first pregnancy, eleven months later she had another set of twins, and about thirteen months later she had another child. She had five children in two years time. At the time the fifth one was born, she had four children age one and a newborn! The first set of twins hadn't had their second birthday. She was busy and needed to slow down. My suggestion in that situation is to use some form of a barrier over the time of ovulation. This brings me to the area of artificial methods of contraception.

Barrier methods are anything that prevents conception by keeping the sperm from reaching the egg. This is a true contraceptive. There are no systemic side effects; there are no medical complications; it's not like putting a medicine into your body. These methods include things like a diaphragm for the wife or a condom for the husband. Also in this category are foams, jellies and suppositories either used alone or in combination with a diaphragm or condom. Barriers are about 97% successful in preventing a pregnancy when used consistently. The wife needs to be fitted for a diaphragm so it's the right size. All the other products can be purchased at a drugstore without a doctor's prescription.

Another artificial method of contraception is sterilization. Sterilization means to render the husband or the wife sterile by surgical means. It's known as a vasectomy for the husband. The tubes that bring the sperm from the testes is interrupted so there are no sperm present at the time of ejaculation. Tubal ligation for the wife

prevents the egg and the sperm from coming together because the wife's fallopian tubes have been severed. Either of these methods is nearly 100% effective. But, it's usually an irreversible procedure. (It can be reversed if the structures weren't totally destroyed.) It's something a couple needs to think through very carefully and weigh all the ramifications before they make a decision.

I recommend sterilization only for an older couple who is very sure they have the family that the Lord wants them to have, and/or for medical reasons that make more pregnancies inadvisable. In one case, a mother nearly died while delivering a set of twins. That would be an example where I would think it may be wise to do something to prevent future pregnancies. If there is a medical problem with the wife, making more pregnancies imprudent, then I recommend she have her tubes tied and not the husband. Why? If the woman would die and her husband would get remarried to a lady of child-bearing age, his new wife couldn't get pregnant.

I also point out to couples not to make this kind of decision in the middle of a pregnancy. That's when a woman may feel miserable and say, "I don't want anymore!" It's amazing how 15 minutes after she's had her baby, her demeanor, her attitude, everything changes tremendously. She can now see her baby and suddenly it is worth all the pain. Some people who are sterilized regretted their decision when they felt good again. In fact, in one study, 17% of women with tubal ligations decided later they wanted to have more children and wanted their tubes repaired. However, even with a successful reversal operation, there is only about a 50% chance of achieving a pregnancy. At any rate, what I am telling you is that you need to be very careful and diligently seek the Lord's will before making a decision about sterilization.

Next, I want to consider some methods of birth control that are definitely wrong. The natural methods of breast feeding, rhythm, and even the barrier methods are much older and often inconve-

nient. As a result of medical technology, doctors can recommend a more convenient birth control method. Many couples have accepted it without any question, not realizing all the implications. The most common method is the use of the birth control pill. The use of the “pill” gained rapid and widespread acceptance through the 1960s and the 1970s. This acceptance marked and promoted a major change in our culture. It now became much easier to separate the sexual act from the process of bearing children. If you remembered to take your pill, you didn’t need to worry about getting pregnant. Pleasure, even among the married, became the main reason for sex. The fundamental relationship of sex to reproduction was lost. Pregnancy became an unwanted “side effect” leading to the desire for abortions.

Physicians and the public at large, including many Christians, were won over to the use of the pill for a variety of reasons. One reason was the “lesser of two evils” idea. That idea reasoned that prevention of an unwanted pregnancy was better than abortion. However, the rate of abortion has closely paralleled the use of oral contraceptives. Now we know that contraception and abortions are closely linked philosophically, psychologically, and biologically. The widespread cultural acceptance of the pill mentally denies the unchanging truth that children are a blessing from God. The “good” that was hoped for has become overwhelmed by the negative aspects of the pill and the related anti-child philosophy. Few good reasons remain for its use.

As Christians, we realize that man’s philosophies are contrary to God’s philosophies. Children are a heritage of the Lord and having your quiver full of them is a blessing from God. That is God’s philosophy.

Beyond the wrong philosophy, you also need to know how the pill works. Many people don’t know how it works; they just take it because their doctor told them to. The primary way the pill

works is to prevent ovulation. It prevents ovulation 90-98% of the time and thus prevents pregnancy 90-98% of the time. Second, it inhibits the migration of the sperm into the womb and can prevent pregnancy that way. However, the third way it works, if the other two have failed, is to change the lining of the womb so that when the conceptus migrates out of the tube, it will not be allowed to implant in the wall of the uterus, but will be aborted! The lower the amount of estrogen in the pill, the more likely for the latter to happen, because estrogen is the component of the pill that inhibits ovulation. (Doctors like to use lower doses because it has fewer side effects). You might say, "But the third mechanism is in effect only a small percentage of the time." Despite how often, or even how rarely, ovulation isn't suppressed, the mere possibility of an abortion taking place should deter any Christian who is concerned about the sanctity of human life. Therefore, the pill is not always a contraceptive since it does not always prevent conception. It is sometimes a contraimplantive when conception has occurred but implantation is prevented. A book by Randy Alcorn entitled Does the Birth Control Pill Cause Abortion? gives many proofs that the pill can act as an abortifacient. There are about 14 million American women using the pill each year and about 60 million in the whole world and yet birth control pills are not true contraceptives.

There are some other methods which can cause an abortion as well. One is the intrauterine device, or IUD. Its primary function is to alter the lining of the womb. Therefore, it is definitely an abortifacient as it prevents the implantation of a child that has been living for four to six days. Yet I find Christian women sometimes unknowingly have allowed well meaning doctors to put IUD's in their bodies. When I explain how they work, they usually want them removed immediately.

There are other methods that work similarly. Depo Provera or progesterone shots are given every three months. These also

work by suppressing ovulation and altering the lining of the uterus. Another method is called Norplant. This is a progesterone drug in pellet form which is implanted under the skin of a woman's upper arm. It has the same mechanism of action as Depo Provera, but lasts for a number of years. A newer method is called the Ortho Evra Patch. You can just put a patch on your body somewhere and it is absorbed through your skin. It is more convenient. You don't have to take the pill or get a shot. You can just put on the patch.

But, calling these methods of birth control "contraceptive" is really quite deceptive. Such deception has meant that many Christians, who would never consider terminating a pregnancy through surgical abortion, are unknowingly using birth control which, at least 2-10% of the time, may be taking the life of a newly conceived child. This percentage may be much higher with the lower dose pills and some of the other methods mentioned above. Dr. Bogomir Kuhar, a pharmacist and expert on chemical abortion, has calculated that combining all forms of non-surgical abortion—IUDs, injectibles like Depo Provera, implants such as Norplant, the pill, etc.—between 8 and 12 million young lives are killed in the US every year. That is a staggering figure compared to the 700,000 to one million surgical abortions done each year.

We claim to be prolife. We claim to honor the sanctity of life. As Christians we declare the biblical truth that life begins at conception and that we oppose all abortions. But if we allow chemical abortions to go on, we are not consistent. We can't compromise by refusing to address some of these methods of birth control which can result in an abortion. Furthermore, not only are we accountable for applying truth to our own lives, we need to be diligent in telling others about it; we can't keep it to ourselves. When counseling young couples, we need to let them know about the abortion risk inherent in these popular methods of birth control. We need to promote God's view, not man's view.

Finally, in practical family planning, moderation is the key. God did say to be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth. The Bible does say that children are a heritage of the Lord. Yet, Paul also said in Ephesians 6:4, “Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

We have the responsibility to train each child diligently. If we are going to pay adequate attention to each child, to truly nurture them, and teach them in the way they should be taught, most of the time they’re going to need to be a little more than 11 months apart. That’s why we need to be realistic. It’s true that not everyone is a Susanna Wesley who spent time every day, individually, with each of her ten children. If you desire to space your children, whether by natural contraception, such as breast feeding or the rhythm method, or some form of artificial contraception, keep in mind that God desires to see good-sized Christian families the majority of the time. Also, make sure you use contraception which is ethical and respects the sanctity of human life. Finally, remember to seek God’s direction in planning a family, for He is sovereign and ultimately in control.

Menstrual Cycle

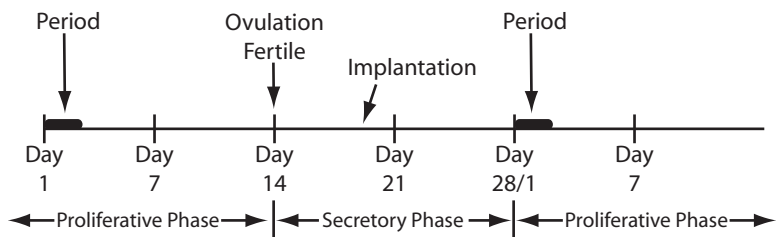


Figure 1

Conception

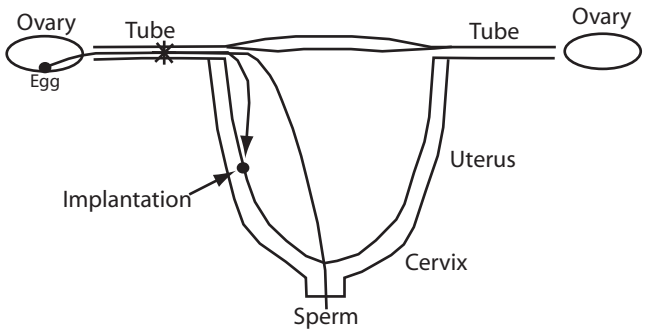
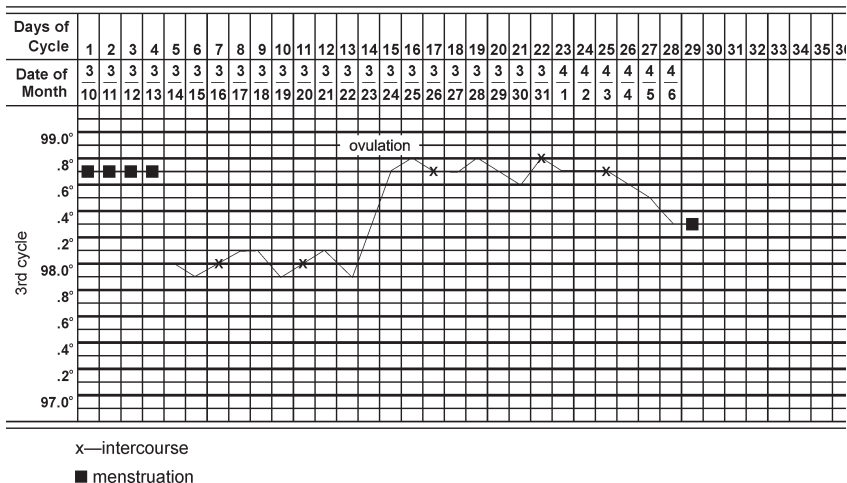


Figure 2

Sample Temperature Record



Instructions:

1. Immediately after waking in the morning and before arising, eating, drinking or smoking, place the thermometer under your tongue for at least five minutes. (Do this every morning except during menstruation.)
2. Record the reading on the graph by placing a dot at the proper location (be accurate). If intercourse has taken place during the previous twenty-four hours, cross the dot (X).
3. Insert the date at top of column in space provided for date of month.
4. Consider the first day of menstrual flow as the start of a cycle. It is not essential to record the temperature during menstruation. However, indicate menstruation with a ■ on the graph starting at extreme left under number one day of cycle. As flow diminishes resume temperature recordings.
5. Any obvious reasons for temperature variation such as an infection, insomnia, or indigestion should be noted on the graph above the reading for that day.
6. If you detect ovulation by a twinge of pain low on one side of the abdomen or by a few drops of vaginal bleeding about midcycle, indicate it on the graph.

Figure 3