

## Returning to Fertility After Childbirth

The return of fertility after childbirth varies greatly among women. Many factors affect the return of menses and ovulation including individual hormonal and physiological differences, method of feeding (breastfeeding, formula, or combination), and stress levels. Statistics show up to forty percent of women will not experience vaginal bleeding before the first ovulation, making it important to chart beforehand. The first several cycles may be more irregular than normal, or vary in length and pattern of cervical mucus. These variables may be more pronounced or longer in women who continue to breastfeed, even if the baby is only breastfeeding at night. Some women may experience continuous cervical mucus and need their Natural Family Planning (NFP) instructor's guidance to assist in identifying true fertile days. Even if you have experience with NFP, a consultation with a NFP instructor is suggested, and charting should begin by four to five months postpartum. It is recommended and wise to follow up with your instructor when a change in reproductive status occurs such as pregnancy, breastfeeding and weaning.

If you are exclusively breastfeeding, meaning the baby only receives breastmilk and nothing else, the average return of menses and ovulation occurs between 6-10 months postpartum. This is nature's way of delaying a return to fertility for a year or two, allowing women to replenish their nutritional and mineral status to pre-pregnancy levels. Of note, if you have had a Cesarean section, ACOG recommends at least 18 months spacing between pregnancies to allow for healing and to optimize the potential for successful TOLAC/VBAC. The AAP and WHO recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of your baby's life, and continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age, as long as mutually desired by both the mother and child. Some signs that may signal or lead to the return of fertility are:

- 1) Less frequent nursing or weaning
- 2) Baby begins eating solid foods
- 3) Baby sleeps longer at night (more than 3-4 hours at a time)
- 4) Mother experiencing stress, anxiety, or illness
- 5) Return of menses

Close follow up with a NFP instructor is important until your cycle becomes regular, usually by the third period after delivery. If you would like to learn more about your individual return to fertility after delivery, please contact us for additional information, advice, and possible treatment options.