

New choices bring wider range of women to family planning

March 18 2008



CycleBeads have been developed by Georgetown University researchers to help women manage their fertility. Credit: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University Medical Center

A study appearing in the March 2008 issue of the journal *Contraception* reports that the Standard Days Method®, a natural family planning method developed by researchers from Georgetown University Medical Center's Institute for Reproductive Health, brings new women to family planning. More than half the women who selected the Standard Days Method had never previously used family planning and on average, contraceptive use increased by 8 percent in communities where the method was introduced.

“This is the first study that looks at provision of a simple, modern method of natural family planning in regular service delivery rather than in a clinical trial. This distinction is important because clinical trials usually provide more training and provider-user contact than in typical family planning services,” said study co-author Rebecka I. Lundgren, MPH, Deputy Director of the Institute for Reproductive Health. “We found that the Standard Days Method reached a group of women whose needs were not being met by existing services. Programs embraced the method as an additional choice because it is easy to use and to teach, it actually works in the real world,” she said.

In a 2002 study, the Georgetown researchers found the Standard Days Method to be more than 95 percent effective and easy to use. To facilitate the use of the method, the researchers developed a color-coded string of beads called CycleBeads®. As a visual tool, CycleBeads helps a woman track her cycle, know if she is on a day when pregnancy is likely or not, and ensure her cycle length is in the range to use the method effectively.

In the new study, the most common reason study participants gave for choosing the Standard Days Method was that it “does not have side effects nor affect women’s health”. Participants also noted the low costs of CycleBeads. Although natural family planning methods are frequently associated with religious beliefs, relatively few women gave this reason for selecting the method.

Education level, number of children, previous use of modern family planning methods, and whether living in an urban or rural area did not appear to affect a woman’s decision to use the Standard Days Method. While the new study reported that the general characteristics of Standard Days Method users varied widely, it did find that 55 percent had never before used any family planning method and few were switching from another effective method.

“One of the most interesting things we found in this study is how interested in and supportive of this method men are,” said Victoria Jennings, Ph.D., Institute Director and professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Georgetown University Medical Center.

“These studies were conducted in a wide variety of cultural settings, but in all of them, men found the method easy to use and most stated that they planned to continue using the Standard Days Method and would recommend it to others.”

The study, which was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, followed 1,646 women who elected to use the Standard Days Method at 14 sites in 6 countries. Women who chose the method were interviewed at several points during the study and their partners were interviewed at the end of the study. Service delivery settings ranged from maternity hospitals to community health services and included non-traditional healthcare providers as an agricultural cooperative and a program involved in water and sanitation.

Source: Georgetown University

Citation: New choices bring wider range of women to family planning (2008, March 18)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-03-choices-wider-range-women-family.html>

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