Understanding Family Planning And Birth Control

Although the term "family planning" is sometimes used interchangeably with birth control or contraception, there is much more to family planning than avoiding or timing a pregnancy. Family planning involves a personal desire for a family, the sense of an ideal number and age difference of the children, and the effect that life experiences and personal relationships will have on these plans.

The main goals of birth control and family planning are to increase the number of planned, desired pregnancies and decrease the likelihood of unintended pregnancy. Reducing the likelihood of sex-related infections is also important.

Both men and women share responsibility for family planning and birth control. Women, however, typically are expected to take on this responsibility.

During their reproductive years women face the challenge of having a fulfilling sex life and planning or avoiding pregnancy. The average woman manages this challenge for almost 40 years from the beginning of menstruation (her first period) when she reaches childbearing age around 12, until menopause, which usually begins around age 50.

Unplanned, unintended or accidental pregnancy can happen at any age between the first period and menopause. According to the most recent research, half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned.

Half of these unintended pregnancies happen because no method of birth control was used. The other half result from incorrect use or because the method failed even though it was used properly. Unfortunately, women with unplanned pregnancies often delay seeing a doctor or midwife for prenatal care, and many have no prenatal care at all. Inadequate prenatal care can result in low birth weight, poor newborn health, and an increased likelihood of infant death before age 1.

The more familiar and comfortable you are with your birth-control method, the more likely you are to use it consistently and correctly and avoid an unplanned pregnancy.

More than one method can be combined to increase protection against pregnancy or to add protection against sexually transmitted infection. Learn to use at least one method properly and consistently so that it reliably serves your needs.