

# Life Issues Forum

## Practical Steps to a Healthier Marriage

By Theresa Notare

*November 3, 2006*

Many married Catholics of reproductive age are using some form of contraception. They may think they are solving a problem and being responsible, or that they are doing something healthy for their marriages. The reality, however, is that contraception is unhealthy for women and for couples' relationships.

The ability to help create another person, i.e., human fertility, is a major function of the human body. Biologically, it is both complex and delicate. Tampering with its mechanisms can lead to a host of physical problems. Unfortunately, many couples know little or nothing about what contraceptives can do to their bodies. Each type of contraceptive causes side effects that range from uncomfortable (like weight gain) to serious (such as stroke). Some side effects are especially dangerous. Women who use the Ortho Evra contraceptive patch, for example, absorb 60% more estrogen than women taking the Pill. That significantly increases a woman's risk of blood clots and strokes. The FDA has issued warnings about the dangers of the patch, but it is still being sold. Hundreds of lawsuits against Ortho-McNeil, the maker of the patch, have been filed citing serious illnesses and even death.

Of course, human fertility involves more than just biology. It is relational, involving a man and a woman, the children they may conceive, their extended family, the wider community, and God. Contraception harms all these relationships.

Contraception distorts the fullness of a married couple's total, mutual gift of themselves to each other. In the very act of their closest and most intimate union, spouses essentially close off one aspect of what married love means – openness to a new life they could help create with God. Both barrier methods and chemicals physically change the sexual bond. It's like saying, "I want to be completely one with you . . . *except.*"

Contraception also fosters the myth that sexual intercourse is mainly for recreation. It erases (or attempts to erase) the procreative potential of sexual intercourse. That mentality is dangerous. Freud once noted that when people take procreation out of sex, sexual dysfunction soon follows. Social problems associated with the widespread use of contraception support his point: an epidemic of sexually transmitted disease; a rising rate of cohabitation, and corresponding rise in poverty and abuse among cohabitating women; adultery and divorce; family breakdown; attempts to "redefine" marriage; widespread use of pornography; acceptance of abortion; and population implosion in many developed countries.

Standing in contrast to the chaotic world that contraception has helped create is the truth of God's design for life and love. The Catholic Church explains God's design as a call for spouses to give themselves to each other completely and permanently, and to reverence God's gift of procreation. The Church understands that for serious reasons, it is moral for husbands and wives

to space and limit births in their families. But this should be done in harmony with God's plan for married love. Natural Family Planning (NFP) can help couples identify signs of a woman's fertility and her infertile phases. NFP allows spouses to be practical about spacing their children's births, without having to turn to dangerous and morally problematic methods of contraception. Taking the time to learn about God's loving design for married love can help your marriage be healthy, happy and holy.

---

Theresa Notare, MA, is the Assistant Director of the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.