

What every family and community has
a right to know about

Timing Births

Note to communicators

It is not yet widely known that family planning is one of the most powerful ways of improving the health of women and children. Births which are 'too many or too close' or to women who are 'too old or too young' account for approximately one third of all infant deaths worldwide.

The four prime health messages of this chapter can therefore help to prevent the deaths of millions of children and hundreds of thousands of women each year.

If today's knowledge about the timing of births is to fulfil its potential for saving lives and improving health, then family planning services will have to be made available to all.

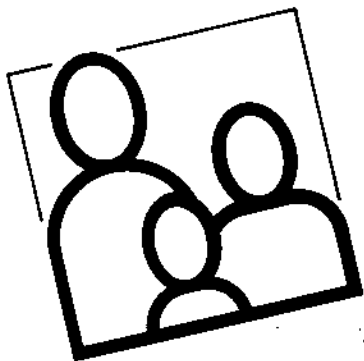
Timing Births Prime Messages

1 Becoming pregnant before the age of 18, or after the age of 35, increases the health risks for both mother and child.

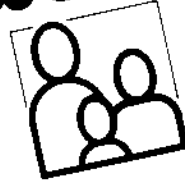
2 The risk of death for young children is increased by up to about 50% if the space between births is less than two years.

3 Having more than four children increases the health risks of pregnancy and childbirth.

4 There are many safe and acceptable ways of avoiding pregnancy. Family planning services can give couples the knowledge and the means to plan when to begin having children, how far apart to have them, and when to stop.



Timing Births Supporting Information



1

Becoming pregnant before the age of 18, or after the age of 35, increases the health risks for both mother and child.

○ Every year over half a million women die from problems linked to pregnancy and childbirth, leaving behind over 1 million motherless children. Most of these deaths could be prevented by acting on today's knowledge about the importance of planning pregnancies.

All girls should be allowed the time to become women before becoming mothers. In societies where many girls marry at an early age, couples should delay the first pregnancy until at least the age of 18.

○ For health reasons alone, no girl should become pregnant before the age of 18. A woman is not physically ready to begin bearing children until she is about 18 years of age. Babies born to women younger than 18 are more likely to be born too early and to weigh too little at birth. The birth itself is likely to be more difficult. Babies born to mothers who are too young are also much more likely to die in the first year of life. The risks to the mother's own health are also greater.

○ After the age of 35, the health risks of pregnancy and childbirth begin to increase again. If a woman is over the age of 35, and has had four or more previous pregnancies, then another pregnancy is a serious risk to her own health and that of her unborn child.

2

The risk of death for young children is increased by about 50% if the space between births is less than two years.

○ For the health of both mothers and children, parents should wait until their youngest child is at least two years old before having another baby.

○ Children born too close together do not usually develop as well, physically or mentally, as children born at least two years apart.

○ One of the greatest threats to the health and growth of a child under the age of two is the birth of a new baby. Breastfeeding stops too suddenly, and the mother has less time to prepare the special foods a young child needs. Also, she may not be able to give the older child the care and attention he or she needs, especially during illness. As a result, the child often fails to grow and develop properly.

○ A mother's body needs two years to recover fully from pregnancy and childbirth. The risk to the mother's health is therefore greater if the next birth follows too closely upon the last. The mother needs to give herself time to get her strength and energy back before she becomes pregnant again.

○ If a woman becomes pregnant before she is fully recovered from bearing a previous child, there is a higher chance that her new baby will be born too early and too light in weight. Low-birth-weight babies are less likely to grow well, more likely to fall ill, and four times more likely to die in the first year of life than babies of normal weight.

3

Having more than four children increases the health risks of pregnancy and childbirth.

○ After a woman has had four children, further pregnancies bring greater risks to the life and health of both mother and child.

Especially if the previous births have not been spaced more than two years apart, a woman's body can easily become exhausted by repeated pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and looking after small children. Further pregnancies usually mean that her own health begins to suffer.

○ After four pregnancies, there is an increased risk of serious health problems such as anaemia ('thin blood') and haemorrhage (heavy loss of blood). The risk of giving birth to babies with disabilities, or with low birth weight, also increases after four pregnancies and after the mother reaches the age of 35.

4

There are many safe and acceptable ways of avoiding pregnancy. Family planning services can give couples the knowledge and the means to plan when to begin having children, how far apart to have them, and when to stop.

○ Most health clinics can offer different methods of family planning so that all couples can choose a method which is acceptable, safe,

convenient, and effective. Couples should ask advice about the most suitable means of family planning from the nearest trained health worker or family planning clinic.

Some methods of family planning, such as condoms and contraceptive pills, may also be available from pharmacies and other shops.

○ Family planning is the responsibility of men as well as women. All men should be aware of the health benefits of family planning - and of the different methods now available.