



## Sixty seconds on . . . contraceptive apps

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### What's 'appening 'ere then?

An increasing number of women in the UK are using contraceptive apps, is what. In 2017 almost 200 000 women were signed up to Swedish-made *Natural Cycles*, the only app certified for contraception in the EU. This number increased from 5000 in 2016, the *Guardian* reported.<sup>1</sup>

### How do contraceptive apps work?

In essence, by tracking body temperature, the appearance of cervical fluid, and other indicators to identify when women ovulate and when they are most fertile. Users of *Natural Cycles* input their temperature each morning to allow the app to calculate their menstrual cycle. The device then indicates when they are able to have sex without protection.

### But is it safe sex?

*Natural Cycles* has highlighted the results of a prospective observational study of 22 785 women, published in *Contraception* in 2017, that indicated an effectiveness rate of 93%.<sup>2</sup> But it's the remaining 7% that are of concern. Earlier this year, doctors at a hospital in Stockholm alerted Swedish authorities after reporting 37 cases of unwanted pregnancies among women who were relying on the app for contraception.

### What do the experts think?

Sarah Hardman, director of the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare's clinical effectiveness unit in Edinburgh, has urged caution. While acknowledging the substantial size of the study, she argues it was self selecting, as it included lots of women who were specifically looking for something different for contraception, and who may have been more motivated than the "average woman on the street."

### So should the average woman on the street steer clear?

Not necessarily. But as Raoul Scherwitzl, the chief executive and co-founder of *Natural Cycles* acknowledges, "our users do tend to be highly motivated." Scherwitzl said the app's typical user is aged 30, in a stable relationship, and engaged in a regular daily routine. Perhaps most crucially, they are also prepared to go through the process of taking their temperature every day, and use protection on fertile days.

- 1 Marsh S. Rise of contraceptive apps sparks fears over unwanted pregnancies. 2018. [www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/01/rise-of-contraceptive-apps-sparks-fears-over-unwanted-pregnancies](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/01/rise-of-contraceptive-apps-sparks-fears-over-unwanted-pregnancies).
- 2 Berglund Scherwitzl E, Lundberg O, Kopp Kallner H, Gemzell Danielsson K, Trussell J, Scherwitzl R. Perfect-use and typical-use Pearl Index of a contraceptive mobile app. *Contraception*. 2017 Dec;96(6):420-5.

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