The Organ-Eating Obsession: Putting Placenta On Your Plate

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"Do women really eat their placenta after delivery?" I was asked many years ago when a coworker mentioned a famous celebrity had talked about it during an interview. I had never heard of the practice before. As I await the birth of my first child, I got to thinking about this question again. I mean, the placenta-eating crowd has really created some demand over the last couple of years! Today, you can easily find services that will encapsulate your placenta, countless articles on the web, and even websites that offer placenta recipes. What's next? Seeing it on a menu? Imagine hearing at your favorite dine, "I'd like a burger, fries and a placenta pop, please!" Bottom line, women are talking about it, asking about it, and yes, eating their placenta.[1]

The human placenta is an amazing organ, but what exactly does it do?

The placenta is a temporary organ that develops during pregnancy to connect mom and her developing baby. The placenta provides oxygen and nutrients, removes substances or waste that could be harmful, and protects the baby from mom's immune system.[2] The placenta also produces hormones that play an important role in pregnancy and the baby's development.[3] When there are problems with the placenta, this can cause serious complications for mom and baby. Furthermore, as our knowledge of the placenta continues to grow, research suggests that problems with the placenta may give us clues or even cause future disease in mom or baby.[4]

What do we know about placentophagy?

The term placentophagy refers to the consumption of the placenta. Among mammal species, animals commonly eat raw placenta immediately after the delivery of their offspring. It has been theorized that animals instinctively consume the placenta for its nutritional benefit to the mother animal, or to prevent predators from being attracted to the location of their newly born offspring.[5] Human placentophagy however, does not consist of eating the raw placenta immediately after delivery. Typically the placenta is processed and consumed in small quantities in the weeks or months after delivery. Some cultures practice consumption of the placenta, but according to studies of cultures around the world this is a rare practice.[6]

Are there benefits to consuming the placenta after delivery?

Supporters of placenta consumption point to several possible benefits for mom. Iron is an essential element needed by our bodies for blood production.[7] When a woman delivers, it is normal to expect some blood loss. Since the placenta is rich in iron, consuming placenta may replace some of the iron lost during birth. The placenta also produces a substance called placental opioid-enhancing factor (POEF) which may aid in pain relief after delivery. Placenta consumption has also been suggested to improve milk production and decrease the chance of postpartum depression. The placenta contains a hormone called placental lactogen which can stimulate milk production. It also contains the hormones progesterone and corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH). Women with low levels of these hormones may be more likely to develop postpartum depression. Therefore, it is thought that consuming placenta containing these hormones could possibly decrease the risk of depression.[8]

While the practice of consuming placenta has gained popularity and the possible benefits may be worth investigating, the practice is mainly supported by individual cases or personal stories. Well controlled studies have not been conducted to investigate the safety of placentophagy or its efficacy in aiding with pain management, milk production, or reducing postpartum depression.[9] Most of the studies published on placentophagy have focused on surveying both men and women regarding the practice and their attitudes towards it.

Have any concerns been raised regarding placenta consumption?

There is currently no regulation of the processing or consumption of human placenta. If the placenta is prepared by an outside party, how can a new mom be assured of sanitary practices and handling? How does she know she has received her own placenta back? Since the placenta is a blood product and tissue, there are concerns that

consumption can transmit infectious diseases. There is also a possibility of contamination that may occur in the hospital or during the process of storage, preservation, or preparation.[8]

Some commentators suggest that due to the processing of the placenta which may include preservation, cooking, drying, or freezing of the tissue, there would be little or no nutritional health benefits. Individuals or companies that process the placenta may add herbal products which consumers should be aware of in case there is a sensitivity or allergy to these products. Some have also suggested that because the placenta acts as a filter of some environmental toxins, eating the placenta could expose mom to higher levels of harmful substances. Finally healthcare providers have also expressed concerns that women experiencing postpartum depression may not seek help or may refuse treatment with medications proven to be effective because they are self-treating at home with placenta.[9]

What can I do if I'm concerned about postpartum depression or milk production?

If you are concerned about developing postpartum depression or think you may be experiencing symptoms, contact your doctor right away. Postpartum depression has serious consequences for both mom and baby, but help is available and symptoms should never be ignored. To learn more about Depression During and After Pregnancy, check out the following fact sheet: https://womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/depression-during-and-after-pregnancy

You can also learn more by visiting the following links:

http://www.postpartum.net/learn-more/pregnancy-postpartum-mental-health/

https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/illnesses/postpartum-depression.html#pubs

If you have recently delivered or are getting close to delivery, and have concerns about producing enough milk, talk to your pediatrician, a lactation consultant, or attend a breastfeeding support group. Making small modifications during breastfeeding can make a big difference. To learn more about solutions to common challenges that come up when breastfeeding visit the following womenshealth.gov page:
https://womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/breastfeeding-challenges

For more information on breastfeeding support, information, and resources visit the following links:
https://womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding

https://womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/breastfeeding-resources

Is it safe to breast feed while consuming placenta?

No studies have been published to accurately evaluate safety of consuming placenta during breastfeeding. Among the things a mom consumes in her diet or the medications she takes, some substances pass more easily into breast milk and can reach the breastfed infant. Because every woman's placenta is slightly different, some placentas may contain substances that others do not or they may contain very different levels of a particular substance compared to another placenta. Without testing individual placentas, it would be difficult to evaluate how they differ and how safe mom's consumption might be for babies who are breastfed.

Where can I get more information about the safety of exposures during breastfeeding?

MotherToBaby experts are ready to answer all of your questions on exposures during breastfeeding. We also answer questions about exposures in pregnancy for women who are currently pregnant or planning a pregnancy, as well as their healthcare providers. You can speak with a MotherToBaby counselor through our free and confidential service. Call us toll free at (866) 626-6847.

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MotherToBaby is a service of the international Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about medications, vaccines, diseases, or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or call the Pregnancy Studies team directly at 877-311-8972. You can also visit MotherToBaby.org to browse a library of fact sheets, as well as pregnancy studies.

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