

Placentophagia: Benefits of Eating the Placenta

This Age-old Tradition Has Some Surprising Benefits



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Placentophagia -- the practice of eating the placenta -- has been observed throughout history in many parts of the world. In Western cultures, eating the placenta is often viewed as barbaric, but thanks to new information about the surprising benefits, there has been a recent push among young mothers to eat the placenta after giving birth. While many Western doctors discourage placentophagia with the claim that it carries no inherent benefits, studies have shown that eating the placenta can curb postpartum depression, replenish nutrients, increase milk production, and slow postpartum hemorrhage.

Placentophagia may deter the onset of postpartum depression

The placenta contains high levels of various vitamins, such as B6, which can help curb postpartum depression. Eating the placenta enables the mother to "reclaim" these vitamins and put them to use in her own body. Placentophagia may also increase a mother's blood levels of a hormone known as CRH (corticotropin-releasing hormone), a known stress-reducer. This hormone is normally secreted by the hypothalamus. According to a study performed by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), "During the last trimester of pregnancy, the placenta secretes so much CRH that the levels in the bloodstream increase threefold. However, it was also discovered that postpartum women have lower than average levels of CRH, triggering depressive symptoms. They concluded that the placenta secreted so much CRH that the hypothalamus stopped producing it (<http://placentabenefits.info/medicinal.asp>)." After childbirth, the hypothalamus doesn't immediately receive the signal to begin producing CRH again, which can lead to postpartum depression. Eating the placenta can raise a mother's CRH levels, reducing symptoms of postpartum depression.

Placentophagia may help replenish nutrients lost during childbirth

Human placenta is rich in various essential nutrients such as iron and protein. Placentophagia can help replenish these nutrients, which are often depleted during childbirth due to blood loss. This benefit of placentophagia may be especially important for vegetarian or vegan mothers, who may have slightly lower blood iron levels to begin with. (Many animals also practice placentophagia, presumably for this reason.)

Placentophagia can increase breastmilk production, especially in women at risk for low milk supply

For centuries, the Chinese have consumed the placenta as a way to increase insufficient milk production. In 1954, a study was conducted in which 210 women, expected to have low milk supply, were administered

dried placenta. 86% of the mothers noticed a significant increase in milk production (<http://placentabenefits.info/medicinal.asp>). It follows, therefore, that placentophagia can be beneficial in stimulating breastmilk production, even for mothers who are not at risk for low supply.

Placentophagia can stimulate uterine contractions and slow postpartum hemorrhage

Oxytocin is a naturally-occurring chemical in the brain that stimulates uterine contractions that lead to the onset of labor. This same chemical also enables the uterus to contract and quickly return to its pre-pregnancy size, as well as slowing postpartum bleeding. Studies have shown that eating the placenta triggers the release of oxytocin into the bloodstream, enabling the uterus to quickly heal and tone itself after childbirth.

Does placentophagia carry any inherent risks?

Many doctors, especially in Western culture, have expressed some concern that eating the placenta may spread disease such as HIV, hepatitis, and other blood-borne illness. However, placentophagia is traditionally practiced only by the mother and not by other parties, so there is no risk of spreading disease. If she has a disease, she cannot reinfect herself, and if she is not currently ill, she cannot become ill from eating her own placenta.

Other than that, there is little risk involved in placentophagia. As with any meat, the placenta must be properly cared for before consumption. Fresh placenta may be eaten raw, but if the placenta is to be stored and used at a later time, it should be frozen or otherwise prepared to prevent bacterial infection.

It is important to note that with some birth practices, such as lotus birth (in which the umbilical cord is left uncut until it dries and detaches naturally days after birth), eating the placenta is not possible due to the treatment of the placenta. However, in instances such as this, the placenta may be used for other purposes, such as placenta art, or the ritual of burial.

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