Placenta eating trend? [1]

Hi Alice!

I heard that TomKat (Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes) were going to eat the placenta after their baby was born. I know that was a joke, but then I heard that some people actually do eat the placenta! My friend said it's supposed to restore nutrients to a woman's body after she gives birth. I'm doubtful about that, seems like just a hippie trend to me. What do you say Alice? Is there any scientific evidence to support placenta eating?

Thanks,
Trying to be open-minded but still grossed out

Answer

Dear Trying to be open-minded but still grossed out,

Believe it or not, there may be a grain of truth in your friend's story. In the animal kingdom most land-roving mammals eat their young's placenta after giving birth, a practice known as placentophagy or placentophagia. Though far from widespread, there are some variations of this practice in the human world as well.

Scientists are not sure why mammal moms eat their young's placenta, but one explanation is that the placenta provides extra nutrition, just as your friend mentioned. Studies with lab rats also indicate this practice may provide pain-relief during and after delivery. An active substance present in the placenta and amniotic fluid called Placental Opioid-Enhancing Factor (POEF) seems to act as an analgesic by raising pain thresholds. A third theory argues that placentophagy fosters caregiving by increasing adult-infant contact while the mother licks her baby clean.

When it comes to humans, there are a wide variety of cultural beliefs [2] and practices about the placenta. For example, some peoples treat the placenta as a spiritual being with its own burial rituals. Other cultures believe that the placenta has healing properties. For example, dried umbilical cord was used to treat childhood illness in ancient Peru.

Modern examples of human placentophagy are rare, and there is no scientific evidence that placenta eating offers any health benefits for people. In 2007, USA Today [3] published a story about women eating their placenta in pill form to ward off postpartum depression. So-called "placenta encapsulation services" dry out the placental tissue and put it into pills that women take in the weeks after giving birth. Interested women should note that these placental pills have not be evaluated or approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In
addition, hospitals are often reluctant to release the placental material because of the chance of spreading blood-borne diseases like hepatitis and HIV.

Placenta eating may serve a greater purpose for other animals, but human mothers and babies seem to do just fine without it. Alice!

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