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,

Despite the fact that it makes you a little squeamish, there may be a grain of truth in your friend’s story about people eating the placenta. 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. While there’s plenty of anecdotal support for consuming the placenta after birth, scientific research doesn’t back up the claims that eating it provides nutritional benefits, and even brings up some potential risks.

Whether or not you want to snack on it, the placenta is an undeniably impressive organ. The pregnant parent’s body creates it as a way to transport nutrients, oxygen, and growth hormones from the parent’s bloodstream to the fetus. Attached to the wall of the womb, the placenta sends these needed resources to the fetus and disposes of the fetus’ waste products through the umbilical cord. Not only does the placenta act as a connection between the body of the unborn child and parent, it also protects the fetus from infection and provides antibodies from the parent’s body in the last three months of pregnancy so that the newborn will have some immune defenses after birth.

The United States officially regards the placenta as a human waste product, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warns against consuming it due to the risks of spreading
disease. However, some proponents claim that eating the placenta after childbirth has nutritional benefits. Some see it as being beneficial because of the high nutrient content of the placenta. Still others frame it in terms of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), where a steamed placenta, along with warming herbs, is consumed as a balance to the hollow, cold space in the womb left by the fetus’s absence. While TCM has incorporated the human placenta as a healing practice since 200 B.C., the specifically postpartum uses of the placenta are a more modern interpretation.

Modern examples of human placentophagy are rare, and there’s no scientific evidence that placenta eating offers the purported health benefits. So-called "placenta encapsulation services" dry out the placental tissue and put it into pills that are taken in the weeks after giving birth. Interested folks might want to take note that these placental pills haven't been evaluated or approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and come with potential risks of spreading infection to the newborn or adverse effects from consuming heavy metals found in the placenta. In addition, hospitals are often reluctant to release the placental material because of the chance of spreading bloodborne diseases such as hepatitis and HIV.

Regardless of whether or not a practice is a trend or has been around for thousands of years, it's good to get a clear understanding of what can be known about a substance before making decisions about it for your health and for others. For those who are concerned about nutrient loss after childbirth, it may be beneficial to speak with a health care provider in advance to ensure your body is getting the nourishment it needs.

Here's to hoping your mind is a little more full,

Alice!

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