

PREGNANCY

placenta pills

Whether you think it's intriguing or gross, an increasing number of moms are getting in on this postpartum trend. **by HOLLY PEVZNER**

LAURA PFEIFER had a rough time after giving birth to her first baby: The Fremont, California, mom suffered from postpartum depression and couldn't produce enough breast milk to continue nursing her son. So when she was pregnant the second time, a few friends persuaded her to try eating her baby's placenta, thinking it might help her feel better.

Pfeifer joined a growing group of new moms—including celebrities like Alicia Silverstone, January Jones, and Kourtney Kardashian—who are consuming their baby's placenta to promote a host of postpartum benefits, from boosting energy and breast-milk production to offsetting the baby blues. Is this for real? Read on for what the experts have to say.

➔ How It Works

Placenta-eating—or placentophagy—has apparently been done (by both women and men) for centuries, and many animals have a powerful, natural instinct to eat their placenta. “These days, it's a common topic among natural-birth circles,” says Katie Page, CNM, a certified nurse-midwife in Forest, Virginia. While you can cook it, blend frozen slivers in a smoothie, or (yikes!) eat it raw,

many placenta-consuming moms choose encapsulation, in which the placenta is steamed, dehydrated, ground, and then sprinkled into capsules. “Placentophagy advocates theorize that a woman gets a custom cocktail of hormones, nutrients, and biological compounds that restores her body after delivery,” explains Daniel C. Benyshek, Ph.D., a medical anthropologist at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

However, there's no scientific proof that placentophagy works. Randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled human studies (the gold standard of medical research) haven't been completed yet. Anecdotal evidence has been encouraging, though: A study of nearly 200 women by Dr. Benyshek in the journal *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* found that 95 percent of them considered the experience “positive” or “very positive,” noting improved mood (40 percent), increased energy (26 percent), and a surge in milk production (15 percent).

Without substantial research, it's impossible to know if placentophagy is truly safe, but many experts do think it's okay as long as both you and your baby are healthy. “While

there's reason to be cautious, it's not enough to recommend against the practice,” says Page. However, you should avoid placentophagy if you have any type of viral or bacterial infection, if there was abnormal development of your placenta; or if your baby passed meconium before birth, says Kecia Gaither, M.D., a maternal-fetal-medicine specialist at Montefiore Medical Center and Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in Bronx, New York.

➔ How to Do It

To get started, visit the website for The Association of Placenta Preparation Arts (APPA; placentaassociation.com) or Placenta Benefits (placentabenefits.info) to find an encapsulation specialist who has gone through a certification process. Although no government agency oversees the certification of encapsulators, members of some placenta-encapsulation specialist services, such as Placenta Benefits and APPA, voluntarily follow government guidelines for safe food processing and storage, says Dr. Benyshek. Next, call your hospital, since each one sets its own policies for releasing a placenta. Pfeifer, for instance, signed a waiver allowing her to take her “medical waste” home and had her ob-gyn place the placenta in a sterile container and a cooler. On average, the whole process costs between \$150 and \$400.

Within days of taking her placenta pills, Pfeifer says she had more breast milk and felt her baby blues lifting. Still, “Don't rely on the purported benefits of placentophagy as a cure-all for real health issues,” says Dr. Benyshek. “If you're at risk for postpartum depression or other postpartum health problems such as iron deficiency or persistent hemorrhaging—or if you have problems even after consuming your placenta—see your doctor.” ❖



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