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Ingesting the placenta: Is it healthy for new moms?

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[+ Enlarge](#) By Craig L. Moran for USA TODAY

In Las Vegas: Anne Swanson, 30, sued Sunrise Hospital after it refused to relinquish her placenta after she gave birth to daughter Maxanne. The court sided with her.

By [Steve Friess](#), Special for USA TODAY

Debi French was dreading the birth of her fourth child. She wanted the baby, to be sure, but she was terrified of being visited again with the overwhelming despair that came over her in the days and weeks after her last delivery.

French's midwife offered her an unusual remedy: She suggested the expectant mother ingest her own placenta as a means of allaying postpartum depression. The temporary organ was saved, dried and emulsified, then placed in gelatin capsules and taken by the mother in the months after the birth in December 2004.

"Before I actually did it, my friends thought it was weird," says French, 29, of Spokane, Wash., whose fifth child is due in August. "But when they saw how fast I recovered from my birth and they knew my history, they thought it was pretty neat. Now I have a lot of friends planning to do it."

The practice, known as placentophagy, is far from widespread and is received with great skepticism by more traditional medical experts. But among a small but vocal contingent of expectant mothers and proponents, it is strongly believed that the organ created by the woman's body to pass nutrients between mother and fetus and is expelled after birth is rich in chemicals that can help mitigate fluctuations in hormones believed to cause postpartum depression.

VIDEO: [Nev. mom wins court fight to keep placenta](#)

"I feel that it is what we as women are meant to do with the placenta," says Jodi Selander of Las Vegas, who offers encapsulation services and is collecting testimonials of women who have ingested placenta for her website, [placentabenefits.info](#).

READERS' OPINIONS

Here's what our readers are saying about the practice of placentophagy.

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Military Brat wrote:

OK, I remember seeing the placenta after my son was born... NOT APPETIZING!!!!!!

jw wrote:

Animals do it instinctively and it has nothing to do with hunger. Well fed domesticated dogs and cats do it and they are well fed. The way it is being ingested, dried, crushed and put into capsules, means there is no taste involved. It sounds like it could work and not be that big of a deal. It doesn't cause any negative problems so I say try it.

perimogi wrote:

Amazing, if it is so healthful, eat it right away, raw, no salt or pepper, au-natural. Drying and putting in a pill makes it a different product. What people can do to self-medicate is beyond thinking.

shamrock wrote:

We are humans... not lower animals, and to facilitate an argument with that sort of logic is naive. For a human to consume a part of its own body is cannibalism; there is no way out of that reality. There is no Biblical history that records the practice, nor condones it.

leon wrote:

Of course hospitals and the FDA don't want mothers to do it. If mothers did something natural, the doctors and the hospital would not be able to shove the FDA's drugs into the mother and charge her for medical visits ...

PD102 wrote:

Since postpartum depression is mental, anything a person 'thinks' will make a difference usually does. Notice that the article says that Nicole suffered depression after the birth of her third son. It doesn't say she ever suffered depression after the first two ...

Questions from the FDA

The practice is raising eyebrows at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Spokeswoman Kris Mejia says the FDA considers that some statements on the website are making medical claims and will be looking more carefully into the matter. "Human placental capsules that make treatment claims ... must be accompanied by well-designed and controlled clinical studies to support approval/licensure," Mejia wrote in an e-mail.

Selander says she does the encapsulation as a service and doesn't charge for it. She also says she sought guidance from the FDA but got no clear answers.

Still, Selander says, "every single mammal ingests its placenta. We are the only mammal on Earth that went away from this practice."

In actuality, some mammals, including seafaring ones and camels, do not. But the fact that most lower mammals do, and the fact that placenta ingestion has been a part of traditional Chinese medicine practices for centuries, is often cited by Selander and other advocates as proof of its health benefits.

Yet Western researchers are highly dubious of whether taking placenta pills or, in the case of some more devoted placentophagists, cooking and eating it as a food is of any value to humans. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists declined to comment, but a spokeswoman for the British counterpart, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, told the BBC last year: "Animals eat their placenta to get nutrition, but when people are already well-nourished, there is no benefit. There is no reason to do it."

Mark Kristal, a professor at State University of New York at Buffalo whose doctoral dissertation in 1971 focused on why animals eat their placentas, says his research leads him to suspect that animals derive pain relief from a substance in the

placenta during delivery that humans would not enjoy by ingesting after the fact.

'People can believe what they want'

Kristal notes that animal births usually involve the mother licking her vaginal area, thereby ingesting the fluid during delivery.

He also says withholding the placenta from the animal mother after birth in lab studies hasn't caused the mother to become depressed or withdraw from her offspring. That observation would contradict the notion that animals ingest it to avert their own version of postpartum depression, he says.

"People can believe what they want, but there's no research to substantiate claims of human benefit," Kristal says. "The cooking process will destroy all the protein and the hormones. ... Drying it out or freezing it would destroy other things."

Mothers who insist that ingesting their placentas has helped them are undeterred.

"I don't need research to say that it's going to help me," says Nicole Dodson-Sands, 32, of Albuquerque, who

suffered depression after her third son's birth six months ago and took placenta pills she made herself. "It's not something that was dangerous."

Some hospitals aren't so sure and refuse to release the placenta after a birth, regarding it as hazardous medical waste. Sunrise Hospital in Las Vegas refused to relinquish the placenta to Anne Swanson, 30, in April, leading to a court battle resolved on Tuesday when a district court judge ruled that Swanson should receive it.

Swanson had planned a birth at her Las Vegas home but was rushed to the hospital for an emergency cesarean section.

The hospital, which had contended that a placenta could be biohazardous waste because it contains blood, says it will not appeal. "The court understood our desire to be compliant with current medical waste regulations," Sunrise Health vice president Amy Dirks Stevens said in a written statement. "Ms. Swanson will receive her placenta upon completion of the court's legal and medical waste compliance directions."

The hospital has been storing the placenta in a freezer; Swanson says it's probably too late for it to be of any medicinal use to her. "Recovering from a C-section was a lot more traumatic, and I was definitely a bit emotional, so my husband will attest I definitely could have used my placenta," she says.

Typically, the placenta is stored by the hospital for a few days to be available for testing if there is a post-pregnancy complication, and then it is destroyed. Some hospitals do allow women to have the placenta just as they allow patients to take home tonsils, kidney stones or appendixes.

Swanson says she is baffled that this became anybody's business but hers, but she is gratified by the court's ruling.

"We didn't even have to have a trial — the judge said, 'Give it to her' — so it was shocking to everybody, actually," Swanson says. "I'm obviously sad that it took a court case to get here, but I'm very excited that more women are actually going to be able to get their placentas if they want them."

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Comments: (248)



migitty79 wrote: 1d 17h ago
placenta....the other white meat

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myname wrote: 2d 4h ago
OMG, this is disgusting. I thought naming a childPlacenta... was bad.. LOL

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Nice Doggy wrote: 2d 14h ago
Gross. I think they need to do a study on why people are this stupid. Some animals eat their young too.
(Wanna bet that the midwife was laughing and saying, "I never thought she'd take me seriously.")

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gas_on_the_fires wrote: 2d 14h ago
Is this Atkins friendly?

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CompMan wrote: 2d 16h ago
Would you like fries with that placenta?

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Dynahog wrote: 2d 17h ago
placentoquakery

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end corruption wrote: 2d 18h ago
If anyone is following this gross practice because it has been done in Chinese medicine for centuries, then keep in mind Chinese people also to this day use formaldehyde as a food preservative, eat dogs , cats, unmentionables as aphrodesiacs, and other bizarre foods. They also just put their food and drug cheif to death for all the ingredients being put into dog food (melamine) and toothpaste. It is also the biggest fake pill manufacturer that uses industrial paints, plastics and other things that are lethal to humans just to make a fast dollar on the black market. This is just plain gross.

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deeppurple wrote: 2d 18h ago

Can we please get this story off the web? It has produced enough gagging and retching, and now it's time to move on. Maybe this story only remains on the "front page" because so many are responding to it and it is way too controversial.

I, personally, agree with every person who was grossed out by this use of the placenta. It's immoral, disgusting and likely only providing a placebo effect. Now, let's move on and quit commenting here. It's only encouraging this site to keep the story going when there are more important health issues that deserve more press than this cannibalistic practice.

Recommend **2** | Report Abuse



pjwalker911 wrote: 2d 19h ago

Not bad served with a fava beans and a nice chianti. f-f-f-f-f-f-f!

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