



The Vagina Museum Podcast

“On Eating Your Placenta”

Episode Description:

As you may know, some people advocate for eating one’s placenta after the birth of a child. The placenta can—according to proponents of the practice—be steamed, stir-fried, blended in a smoothie, or dried and encapsulated in pills. A whole host of benefits have been claimed, as has an ancient and global precedent. In this episode, we look for historical evidence of human “placentophagy” and ask scientific and medical experts to weigh in on the trend.

Sources & Further Reading

[Birth, attitudes and placentophagy: a thematic discourse analysis of discussions on UK parenting forums](#) by Riley Botelle and Chris Willot (2020, Academic Article)

[Ben Cao Gang Mu \(*Compendium of materia medica*\)](#) by Li Shizhen (1593, Book)

[The Monkey and the Inkpot](#) by Carla Nappi (2009, Book)

[A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History: 960–1665](#) by Charlotte Furth (1999, Book)

[A brief biography and list of Huang Yong Ping’s work](#) by Kamel Mennour (webpage)

[In Search of Human Placentophagy: A Cross-Cultural Survey of Human Placenta Consumption, Disposal Practices, and Cultural Beliefs](#) by Sharon Young and Daniel Benyshek (2010, Academic Article)

[Wooden placenta bowl, Maori, New Zealand](#) (1890-1925, Science Museum, London, Image)

Reference to 1972 article in Rolling Stone Magazine on placenta eating: [Opinion: Placenta-Eating Went Mainstream When Many Doctors Stopped Listening](#) by Daniela Blei (2019, Article)

[Placentophagy: Therapeutic Miracle or Myth?](#) by Cynthia W. Coyle, Kathryn E. Hulse, Katherine L. Wisner, Kara E. Driscoll and Crystal T. Clark (2015, Academic Article)

[Presence and concentration of 17 hormones in human placenta processed for encapsulation and consumption](#) by Sharon Young, Laura Grydera, David Zava, David Kimball, and Daniel Benyshek (2016, Academic Article)

See also, [Human placenta processed for encapsulation contains modest concentrations of 14 trace minerals and elements](#) by Sharon Young Laura Gryder, Winnie David, Yuanxin Teng, Shawn Gerstenberger, Daniel C. Benyshek (2016, Academic Article)

[Thank You for Not Eating Your Placenta](#) by Jen Gunter (2018, Article)

[Notes from the Field: Late-Onset Infant Group B Streptococcus Infection Associated with Maternal Consumption of Capsules Containing Dehydrated Placenta](#) by Buser GL, Mató S, Zhang AY, Metcalf BJ, Beall B, Thomas AR (2016, Report)

[The placenta economy](#) by Charlotte Krolokke, Elizabeth Dickinson and Karen Foss (2016, Academic Article)

[“It’s Just Not Very Realistic”: Perceptions of Media Among Pregnant and Postpartum Women](#) by Toni Liechty, Sarah M. Coyne, Kevin M. Collier and Aubrey D. Sharp (2017, Academic Article)

Further Reading

[Perspectives from Patients and Healthcare Providers on the Practice of Maternal Placentophagy](#) by Stephanie A. Schuette, Kara M. Brown, Danielle A. Cuthbert, Cynthia W. Coyle, Katherine L. Wisner, M. Camille Hoffman, Amy Yang, Jody D. Ciolino, Rebecca L. Newmark, and Crystal T.

Clark (2017, Academic Article) [NB in Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine which includes research on some problematic practices such as homeopathy]

[Human Maternal Placentophagy: A Survey of Self-Reported Motivations and Experiences Associated with Placenta Consumption](#) by Jodi Selander, Allison Cantor, Sharon Young and Daniel Benyshek (2013, Academic Article)

[“Bouncing back”: How Australia's leading women's magazines portray the postpartum ‘body’](#) by Heike Roth, Caroline Homer, Jennifer Fenwick (2012, Academic Article)

[Social media as social support in pregnancy and the postpartum](#) by Brenda Baker and Irene Yang (2018, Academic Article)

[Beware the ‘science’ behind some wellness industry’s claims](#) by Marisa Fernandez (2020, Article)

[Gwyneth Paltrow’s ‘Goop Lab’ is horrible. The medical industry is partly to blame.](#) by Nikki Stamp (2020, Article)

[How the wellness industry and Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop Prey on Women](#) by Rebecca Tucker (2020, Article)

Episode Transcript:

Alyssa: *Dear listeners, today’s episode may be a hard pill to swallow, because once again we are venturing into the world of wellness. This time? We are bringing you the whole, encapsulated truth on placentophagy—the mammalian act of eating one’s placenta after giving birth...a practice that until recently was considered exclusive to *non-human* animals.*

The trend of parental placenta eating has grown in recent decades. Birthing parents who consume the placenta of their child—raw, cooked, or dehydrated and encapsulated as a pill—do so in order to access a bevy of purported benefits. Kim Kardashian, January Jones, and Crissy Teigen have shared stories of taking daily doses post-pregnancy, Hillary Duff opted for a smoothie, and many expectant parents have discussed placentophagy on British parenting forums [Mumsnet and Netmums](#).

A whole lot of proposed benefits have been listed online: preventing postpartum depression, improving lactation, replenishing lost nutrients, and getting your body back to its pre-pregnant state faster. But...is any of it true?

Consuming the placenta is touted as a preventative cure-all for the ailments of birthing parents, and since this is the only part of the gynaecological anatomy that anyone eats—at least literally..wink wink oral sex—we thought it was worth investigating this practice and whether it has any historical or scientific backing.

You're listening to the Vagina Museum podcast, a production of the Vagina Museum. I'm your host, Alyssa Chafee.

That's right, there is a Vagina Museum. The Vagina Museum is the world's first bricks and mortar museum dedicated to vaginas, vulvas, and the gynaecological anatomy. You can find us in London's Camden Market where we're working to build a world where no one is ashamed of their bodies, everyone has bodily autonomy and all of humanity works together to build a society that is free and equal.

If that's something you want too, it's easy to get involved. You can visit in person, grab some amazing vagina swag from our online gift shop, donate, or become a card-carrying member of the Cliterati....literally...when you become a member of the museum, we mail you a card proving to the world that you have been inducted into the Cliterati.

Our amazing crowdfunder supporters have kept us going all through lockdown, and we want to give a huge shoutout to three of these lovely people who chose a podcast shout-out as their reward: Brian Mackenwells, Antony Brown, and Cristin— thank you for helping to keep our doors open you cunning stunts.

Before we dig in to all things placenta, a reminder that we're all about vaginas and people with vaginas, no matter their gender. You'll hear us using gender-inclusive language in our narration unless we are specifically talking about women. Sometimes our guests in this episode refer to mothers and women by default, but the insights they share can be applied to anyone who experiences pregnancy as well as the people who love and support them.

I'll be joined on this episode by historian Dr Laurence Totelin, biologist Dr Bryony McNeill, and gynaecologist Dr Jen Gunter.

Our first course is a chat with Dr Bryony McNeill from the Deakin University's School of Medicine. Dr McNeill is a reproductive biologist who has studied placentas in detail, and before we ask our experts whether you should eat the placenta after giving birth, she's going to get us started with an important first question: what actually is the placenta?

Dr McNeill: So the placenta is an amazing organ. I may be a little bit biased, um, but it's really responsible for sustaining the development of a foetus. And so it provides all of the nutrients and takes away the waste from the baby, and it also produces a whole lot of hormones and signalling factors, which act on the mother's body to help her maintain the pregnancy and prepare for birth and lactation after birth of the baby. So quite an amazing transient organ that's unique to pregnancy.

It develops really early on after fertilization. So essentially it attaches onto the uterus and implants and attaches into the maternal blood vessels. So develop a blood supply to sustain that pregnancy.

Alyssa: *The placenta is indeed pretty amazing. It's an organ that is created by the body just for pregnancy. But that also means that after the baby is delivered, the placenta has served its purpose, and must be delivered so it doesn't remain in the parent's body.*

Ok. That all sounds good. But why do some people believe it's healthy to consume it, and when did the placenta become a must-have postnatal power snack?

Our initial research suggested that placenta eating is a recent trend, but we wanted to do our due diligence and see how the placenta was conceptualized, used, and treated in history.

To help us on this mission, we turned to Dr Laurence Totelin, a historian of Greek and Roman science, medicine, and technology from the 5th century BCE to the end of the second century CE, to find out what the Greeks and Romans knew about the placenta and whether or not they ever used it medicinally.

Dr Totelin: So there's very few descriptions of the placenta.

They think of it as a membrane that protects the child. They don't really think of it as something that is feeding the child in any proper way. And I think one of the most important things about the placenta is that it has to come out. That if the placenta that doesn't come out, it can lead to bleeding and it can lead to maternal death.

Alyssa: *So the detailed medical texts that have survived from Greek and Roman society with mention of the placenta focus primarily on the need to get it out.*

Dr Totelin: In the Hippocratic Corpus or those early, uh, medical text, there's a lot of recipes to expel the placenta. Uh, so, um, and actually often, uh, so it, they say a remedy to, uh, expel the placenta and also they say to bring down the menses, so they mean to regulate menstruation. And sometimes they also add, and to expel the embryo, by which sometimes they mean, uh, they, they say the embryo, if it's dead. And sometimes they don't, so end up points to forms of abortion. So, so those are remedies that you can use in, in various contexts. Uh, they, uh, they, uh, either emmenagogue, so they bring down blood or they, uh, they, they create contractions of the of the uterus.

Dr Totelin: So for instance, they use a plant called Sylvium and Sylvium is a very interesting ancient plant. It's a, it's a plant that only grew in one place in the world called Cyrene, which is in modern Libya. And, uh, that apparently went extinct in the first century of the common era. And that plant is, um, in, uh, early texts is described as being windy. So it creates a wind, uh, by which they mean, uh, it, uh, it means it makes people bloated and, uh, uh, makes them have wind, but they also say they can create a wind in the uterus.

And, uh, I guess so by, by which they mean that this wind will then blow in the uterus and expel the, uh, the, the placenta,

Dr Totelin: Another remedy that I noted here that is quite a good one. Uh, it's quite an unusual one, but, um, so they, uh, they say that a purge the afterbirth, so the placenta, you should use the fresh liver of a turtle still alive.

And then you have to crush it in a woman's milk. Um, and then, uh, add some Iris perfume in wine and then apply this as a, as a pessary.

Alyssa: *In this case, a pessary meaning a remedy inserted into the vagina.*

Dr Totelin: And that's, that's interesting. So when women's milk is used in, uh, in ancient recipes, um, it's usually used as a, as an ingredient that's seen as, uh, a gentle ingredient, uh, so a soothing ingredient. Um, but it's also, uh, an ingredient that is always has associations with, uh, w with sexuality, basically, because there's an understanding that, uh, that, that milk, uh, is, uh, um, well for the ancients, uh, milk is transformed menstrual blood. So, uh, when, uh, when someone is, uh, menstruating, uh, they, uh, they, they can't produce blood and vice versa in, uh, in ancient thought. Um, so, so, so here, it's pointing at, at it's all this, um, the connotations associated with, uh, a woman's a woman's milk in that recipe.

Alyssa: *While most of the remedies that Dr Totelin has seen are herbal, the turtle in breast-milk solution is not the only one requiring an ingredient from the animal kingdom. There is also a recipe which uses powdered cantharidin, a secretion of the Spanish fly beetle. This toxic beetle dust was often used as an aphrodisiac; apply it the genitals and it makes the blood flow, causing a tingling sensation. A larger quantity was applied as a pessary to expel afterbirth.*

Alyssa: *And if pharmaceutical remedies didn't work, the medical texts of the Greeks suggest a few less elegant options:*

Dr Totelin: But there's also some, um, mechanical processes to expel the, uh, the afterbirth. So the, uh, the placenta, uh, is not naturally, uh, expelled. So some people, uh, some, some recommendations are to add weights and then, uh, let's the gravity, um, uh, do its job. Some people say to make the woman sneeze, uh, and that, uh, the sneezing would, would create a form of, I don't know, contraction. Uh, sometimes they say to shake the woman, uh, and then sometimes that's the worst. They say to tie a woman to a ladder and then use the ladder to shake the woman, uh, about, and that would, uh, help bring down the uterus. I mean, those, those mechanical, um, things they point to desperation really, uh, because, you know, uh, they, they, as you can imagine, that is probably because the, the life of the woman was in serious danger. Um, and, uh, they, they, they knew that they had to, uh, to do something.

Alyssa: *So the Greeks and Romans had a number of ways to expel placenta that didn't come out on its own, but beyond this particular complication, they don't have much interest in our organ du jour.*

Dr Totelin: So it's quite surprising the, the silence around this, uh, which is a very important organ.

Dr Totelin: There's not even descriptions in the texts I know of how to to get rid of the placenta, uh, to dispose of it.

And actually yesterday I did look at some of the key works on scholarly works on ancient gynecology and actually placenta is often a word that is not indexed. So that, that means that this it, and that points to the absence of descriptions of, uh, rituals surrounding the human placenta.

Alyssa: *But we don't exactly know what that absence means.*

Dr Totelin: It's something we have to deal with a lot in, uh, in ancient history, generally in an ancient medicine specifically, uh, and it, it can be read in, in several ways. So sometimes, um, when the silence, actually you can imagine that the practices were so common that they didn't need to be described, you know, when you cook, uh, you don't generally say, take a pan, you know, you just say, boil water. So that happens in, in medical texts, they don't say, take a pan. They just, uh, tell you what ingredients are needed, so that silence can mean that it means, uh, well, everyone knew about it. Sometimes silence can point to, to a form of taboo, or although that's, sometimes the notion dies, uh, we should be careful, uh, using, and, and sometimes silence points to, to lack of knowledge. So, and, and that leads you to try trying to understand who was writing those texts. So, um, there's general agreement that the texts we have were written by men, uh, but that sometimes they were incorporating knowledge, uh, from women and they say that women know more about their bodies than men, men do. Uh, but there's, sometimes things are lost in translation. So sometimes things were not transmitted, uh, like that. So, silence can, can mean all sorts of different things.

Alyssa: *So that's the Romans sorted.*

After speaking with Dr Totelin, I looked for more research on placenta-related texts from other societies over the last two thousand years.

One of the most cited examples of [human placenta in medicine](#) dates back to the 16th century: Li Shizhen's [Ben cao gang mu](#), or the Compendium of materia medica.

And by cited, I mean thrown around without any context or best practices for using primary historical sources.

For example: The Placenta Remedies Network, which promotes the use of placenta in natural healing and wellness, has the following sentences as evidence on their website: "Li Shizhen first wrote about placenta as a medicine in the 1500's when he compiled the first Materia Medica on Traditional Chinese Medicine. Dried placenta has been used widely ever since for many different symptoms."

But that's a huge simplification and generalization. We did some digging to see what authoritative sources on this text we could find, and it required sorting through a lot of citations of secondary sources that felt like the telephone game, where one article-writer is linking back to another who is linking back to another and by the time you reach the actual research at the start, it doesn't match the information that's being spread.

Li published his compendium in 1596, and it was his attempt to amass the existing literature on natural objects in the context of medicine.

*There is no English translation of the entire text, but Carla Nappi, a historian of China, did write a book that details what natural knowledge looked like in 16th century China through the lens of Li's book. In her book, [The Monkey and the Inkpot](#), Nappi writes that Li does refer to the human placenta. In fact, Li describes an account of mothers eating their own placentas in a southern region of China. But, he **also** uses derogatory language to describe the people of this region, and finds the practice morally wrong, so I think we can take this example with a grain of salt.*

Li does go on to describe how placenta is dried and used in medicine for others—which was seen as an acceptable practice. Historian Charlotte Furth similarly cites Li's work in her book, [A Flourishing Yin](#). In an end-note she shares an anecdotal report that dried placenta is still used in traditional Chinese medicine, supplied by hospitals.

The Compendium has been digitized, and you can find a link to this Chinese text in our show notes.

*Besides Li's text, there really hasn't been many other sources that show placenta eating in history, so his work has become the go-to historical source. However, we should be careful of using this example to prove or disprove the presence of placentophagy in humans historically. First, as far as we can tell, Li is treating dried placenta as a general ingredient in remedies that are not specific to women or mothers. Also we should take what he wrote in context—this encyclopedia is filled with his own opinions and morals—and while it has become **THE** book on traditional Chinese medicine, it is only one account from 500 years ago. Historiography—or the study of written history—teaches us to be source critical when it comes to centuries-old accounts of anything. We aren't qualified to evaluate this source, but what we can say is that it's not evidence for placenta being consistently eaten fresh or dried ever since the 1500s.*

Looking beyond 16th century China, a [2010 study](#) by Drs Sharon Young and Daniel Benyshek looked for placenta references across 179 human societies throughout the centuries. In 109 of these societies, they found recorded ways to treat or discard the placenta for practical and ritual purposes. Many cultures—including the [Maori of New Zealand](#)—bury the placenta, while others hang it or incinerate it or follow other specific practices according to the needs of the mother and child. For example, some societies examined in the study purposefully allowed animals to eat the placenta as a way to prevent future pregnancies. Others preserve them for future medicinal or ritual use.

67 of these societies held or hold beliefs about the power of the placenta—either as a way to predict the future of the mother or child, or as a tool for ritual practices.

*So there is documentation of ritual and traditions around the placenta; however, out of all of these sources, there was only **one** example of a birthing person eating their placenta, and it's a recent example involving an Anglo woman in Mexico.*

In [an article for Undark Magazine](#), historian Daniela Blei traces the recent trend of eating the placenta back to just 50 years ago when an anonymous writer described eating their placenta in the [June 1972 issue of Rolling Stone Magazine](#). The author chose to steam their placenta and described it as “wonderfully replenishing and delicious”. From there, Blei says, it took off in the California communes of the 70s and quickly found its way here to the UK.

But while Blei found early descriptions of women having to choke their placenta and struggling to eat it, affordable and accessible encapsulation technology has now made it really easy to take your placenta as a tasteless pill.

Now, obviously there are lots of medical advances and scientific discoveries around health and pregnancy that have been made in the last 50 years, so the fact that eating the placenta wasn't practiced with any regularity up until then does not on its own discredit the practice.

But, having ruled out a significant cultural or historical precedent for eating the placenta, the question becomes....is placentophagy a recent medical or scientific advancement?

Dr. Bryony McNeill,—our biologist from earlier in the episode—has some thoughts on these trends and their scientific credibility:

Dr McNeill: Obviously with my research background I'm really interested in the placenta and all of the different hormones and things that it produces. And so I was really interested when I saw mostly on social media, really a bit more information coming up about people eating their placenta and having it encapsulated into pills. And I was really interested in looking into a little bit more of the scientific background to this. Most of the kind of proponents of the placenta encapsulation seem to quote a lot of benefits. But I couldn't really see any actual evidence basis for these claims. So I wanted to do a little bit more research, being a placenta researcher, I was kind of interested.

Dr McNeill: Most of the proposed benefits for eating the placenta just seem to be around so mood, so just kind of stabilizing mood and even prevention of things like postnatal depression

and around supporting lactation. So helping with milk supply. But really guess firstly, there's not a lot of research that's been done. And the limited number of studies that have been published really suggest that these claims aren't supported by any scientific basis.

And so there haven't been any rigorous studies and it's based mostly on just reports from people who have eaten their placentas who say, yeah, I felt great. And you know, there must be something in it. And that certainly there's been no proper studies and probably most of these benefits are attributable to a placebo effect.

Alyssa: *This lack of studies was examined in a [2015 meta-analysis](#) by Cynthia Coyle et al in the Archives of Women's Health. Looking at existing academic research, they found no studies that directly investigated the effect of eating one's own placenta, and only a handful of studies on people's attitudes and experiences around the practice.*

In 2020, [Riley Botelle and Chris Willot analysed](#) British parenting forums Netmums and Mumsnet to look at attitudes around placenta consumption, and found that while some people showed disgust for the practice, positive comments on people's own experiences made up more than half of all posts on placentophagy. The majority reported using encapsulation—taking the dried and ground placenta in pill form. So the bulk of information being shared among the parents or expecting parents on these forums was anecdotal.

Dr McNeill: I guess one of the things that I find interesting is a lot of these benefits are supposedly based on some of the hormones, which are contained in the placenta. And I guess this kind of made me interested because a lot of the work I've done looking at placental hormones, we know that they break down really quickly. So when we're working in the lab, if we're wanting to extract hormones to study them, we have to collect the placentas and really quickly freeze them in liquid nitrogen and store them at -80 degrees to keep these hormones intact and biologically active. And so when we look at what happens with placenta encapsulation, the placentas are collected some point after birth. They sit around at room temperature for a while, they're heated up as part of the encapsulation process. Um, so I'm pretty skeptical as to how much active hormone they would actually still be contained in these capsules. And again, the limited amount of research which has been done suggests that there really isn't a lot actually that survives that encapsulation process and probably not in a dose which is sufficient to have a biological effect.

Dr McNeill: I guess there's, um, yeah, move towards perhaps sort of what's seen as natural approach and that the placenta is, you know, something natural, your body produces it, therefore it must be beneficial. Um, but really there isn't a lot of, well, there isn't really any evidence to support this. Um, The only kind of evidence I could find for a possible benefit of

eating the placentas from animal studies where, animals consume the placenta straight after birth. So they eat it, hasn't been dried or encapsulated that eat the whole thing and potentially there's some pain relieving components in their placenta, but these are known to be destroyed by high temperatures. And also, again, it's probably a dose effect where if you're breaking up the placenta into lots and lots of capsules, you're probably not getting the dose that would be required if any of it were to survive their encapsulation process.

Alyssa: *On the topic of hormones, a 2016 [study](#) by Sharon Young and colleagues in the journal Placenta did measure the hormones in encapsulated placenta. They looked at 17 different hormones and found detectable levels of three. However, the study itself said there are so many factors involved in how the body responds to hormones, there is no way to know if or how they would have an effect.*

Dr McNeill: And I guess on the flip side, I guess there's some concerns around potentially as well as these supposedly beneficial components of the placenta, that there could also be some nasties and they said they could be toxins, which have accumulated. So part of the placenta's role is obviously, um, keeping out some harmful compounds from reaching the developing fetus. And so these potentially could be contained in the placenta and even things like, um, pollutants, there's some interest in whether these may be detectable in the placenta.

Alyssa: *Not only has the potential for harmful substances not been studied, the placenta isn't always prepared in a sterile environment—which has its own risks. Dr Jen Gunter, OB/GYN and author of The Vagina Bible, [doesn't mince words](#) when it comes to this issue:*

Dr Jen Gunter: We don't have any data on the safety of eating the placenta because it's not recommended and we do know that there are cases of, um, [infants getting group B strep](#), uh, from the mother eating, um, the capsules that were prepared. And we, you know, these capsules are not prepared in any kind of, um, biologically safe way. Many times they are dried in the oven at a doula's house or another person's house and then ground up. I've certainly heard stories of the, um, the grind, the dehydrator that dehydrates, the placenta being just used for placenta after placenta, without autoclaving or things like that. I've heard of, um, you know, grinder is being used over and over and not, you know, it, when you use human waste products—cause that's what a placenta is—You use any biological product is biohazard. And each time that container has to be, you know, autoclaved or sterilized and depending on the container, there's specific ways it needs to be cleaned, right? So some things need steam, something, you know, I'm, you know, I'm not an expert in it, but all I know is there are people who are so, so it's not surprising then that, because you know, about 10% of women are positive for group B strep that contaminated placentas are going to lead to contaminated pills. And there's absolutely no science to support that it has any kind of benefit so that's what we know about it.

Alyssa: *So with these potential risks and lack of evidence showing benefits, why does this practice persist? One of the big claims made for its safety and value is that it's "natural," that it comes from the body naturally and that it's very common among mammals that develop placentas during pregnancy, with the exceptions of humans, sea mammals, and the camelid family—that's camels, alpacas, llamas and other similar species. So, the reasoning goes, if it's common in nature and apes do it, it must be good for us as well.*

Dr Jen Gunter: Yeah. So, um, that, that always fascinates me. So people do say, Hey, well, animals do it. So, so human should do it. Well, the majority of animals reproduce by estrus, which is an estrous cycle, which is completely different than a menstrual cycle. So we're not really similar, similar hormonally in any way. Um, you know, animals are out in the wild. They have know they have evolved totally different mechanisms. I mean, you know, some of them have gestations that are 40 days and some have gestations that are two years. I mean, it's, it's, the comparisons are ridiculous, but, you know, I always say, well, okay, so my cat eats grass when she has an upset stomach. So then she vomits, how would you feel if your gastroenterologist, your stomach doctor said, Hey, you have an upset stomach, cats eat grass. So I think you should go eat grass.

Alyssa: *The human placenta just isn't the same as other animals. And there isn't any definite reason why some mammals do eat theirs. They may eat their placenta to hide their birth from potential predators or as a quick source of nutrients in a tough environment.*

Dr Bryony McNeill also pointed out that the fact that the human placenta is unique and comes with its own challenges.

Dr McNeill: We obviously study a lot of animal placentas, um, as part of our research and these differences between species is something that's quite challenging for research because the human placenta is a little bit different and some of the problems in pregnancy. So things like preeclampsia, which we see in human pregnancy don't really occur. Um, in other mammals just probably partly due to the differences in the way that our placenta develops and some of the kind of intricate signaling that's going on in the placenta. So it's a really fascinating organ and yes, slightly different in all of the different animal groups.

Alyssa: *As a general matter, important to remember that just because something occurs naturally, does not mean it's good for us or that it can't harm us. Plenty of plants that humans can consume are toxic to other animals, and of course there are plants that can kill humans if ingested—think poisonous mushrooms, for example.*

Unfortunately, the claims being made to sell placentophagy, that it's a 'natural' way for our bodies to heal faster, be stronger, and do better...are utterly baseless.

We don't want to shame anyone who has opted to consume their placenta. That's not what this podcast is about. We just want you to have all the facts. And we want to hold companies and influencers pushing false claims accountable for the information they are putting out into the world.

Dr McNeill: I think it's difficult that there isn't a lot of evidence being disseminated to people and a lot of the claims really don't have any backing. And I think that's probably my main issue. I think that, uh, if people are being charged quite a lot of money, which often these encapsulation services, it's not cheap. And if the claims really don't have any basis to them, um, I feel like it is potentially taking advantage of women who are in a, quite a vulnerable time of your life when you've just had a baby and you're wanting to do everything you can to, you know, make sure that that postpartum period goes well and you know, you're producing milk. And I think that that's one of the problems with the industry, from my perspective anyway.

Alyssa: Mothers often face enormous social pressure to be as healthy, strong, and nurturing as possible, and **some** pre- and post-natal wellness business prey on this fear in order to sell products that every "good" mother needs. And they package these services as empowerment. Here's my co-producer Hannah Hethmon to summarize some of the research done around this facet of placentophagy:

Hannah: Our term of the day is '[placenta economy](#)', a phrase coined by Charlotte Krolokke, Elizabeth Dickinson and Karen Foss in a fascinating 2016 article in the European Journal of Women's Studies called "The placenta economy: From trashed to treasured bio-products." In this study, they identify three reasons or justifications used for placenta-eating. We've covered the first two—nature is natural and it's ancient medicine—and the third is empowerment.

The authors interviewed 19 women in Denmark, Canada, the UK, US and Australia – all who happen to be white—about why they chose to eat their placenta. In a world that focuses on the immediate physical health of the birthing parent and baby, they viewed this practice as something for the parent.

They saw it as a practice opposition to standard Western healthcare, a form of rebellion from the cold, sterile hospital. While doctors focus on "Is this stitch fixed and is baby gaining weight?" this practice is advertised as getting to the emotional and mental needs of the parent. But what the researchers in this study argue is that the placentophagy practitioners ignore or miss the

contradiction that—especially for those who chose to make pills out of placenta—they were actually medicalising their medical subversion.

It's billed as natural and ancient, but re-packaged into easily-digestible Westernized formats like packs of pills or a pink smoothie.

The researchers found that the parents they profiled chose placenta eating to avoid the things postpartum depression, lack of milk and lack of energy. Joy, breastfeeding, and energy are seen as signs of 'good' mothering.

Conversely, experiencing depression, lactation issues, and low-energy can cause shame and anxiety among parents who are trying to meet the airbrushed mommy-blogger standard. This feeds into the variety of neoliberal empowerment that treats the female body and the maternal body as a constant work in progress that must be continually optimized. And of course there are products to help for those that can afford them.

This kind of empowerment is for the privileged.

In the Western world, we are bombarded with images and stories of celebrities, influencers and TV show characters who ['bounce back'](#) just months after pregnancy. And this expectation to "bounce back" to a superior state is then foisted on everyday people. A [2017 study](#) by Toni Liechty and colleagues in Health Communication found that 65% of women surveyed thought images of pregnancy in the media don't represent the wide variety of experiences and appearances pregnancy can take. That 2017 study also said that the media sets unrealistic expectations about how quickly people can lose their baby weight, not accounting for the healing process, hormones, and the stress of caring for a newborn. While some new and soon-to-be parents view social media as a place of support, others saw it as a place of judgement, and many felt the effects of both. It is a complex relationship.

Personally, as I slide into my 30s and watch more and more childhood friends and acquaintances having babies, I can't help but notice the way in which they talk on social media about the need to lose weight as fast as possible after delivery, despite the fact that they don't work in industries based on appearance and fitness.

Alyssa: *So there's a pressure for parents to have healthy, natural births and "bounce back" and reverse the changes to their bodies as fast as possible. They are also expected to perform at a motherhood at an acceptable social standard. The common challenges new parents face are often kept hidden because the stigma of being a bad mother is so frightening. And to top it off, the medical establishment does have a lot of institutional sexism and racism that has*

contributed to gaps in postpartum care. So it's no wonder parents are looking for a solution that solves these issues.

Here's Dr Jen Gunter again:

Dr Jen Gunter: I guess the other thing I would say is that there are a lot of gaps in postpartum care, and many women are not supported. And many women suffer with postpartum depression and many women have problems with breastfeeding and there are so many societal pressures. And so I get that there are those gaps, but you know, eating your placenta is not going to fill those gaps. And there are, you know, there are many other ways I think that, that both medicine and society could work to support women who are postpartum. So I think that there are definitely gaps, and I see how women can be lured into those things. Again, I always say people who are promoting these kinds of practices, they are the predators. I can see how people get lured into that. And so, you know, my hope again is that we can fix those gaps. So, so women don't feel, they have to look there.

Alyssa: *Placentophagy claims to fill those gaps where science, medicine, and society aren't meeting the [emotional and mental needs of birthing parents aren't being met](#).*

In this episode, we've spent a lot of time detailing the lack of historical, cultural, or scientific evidence for eating the placenta, but that's not going to change the minds of people currently sipping their placenta smoothie or using it to season a stir fry. Because as long as these gaps in care remain, people will understandably look for solutions. And the less credible support they find, the more desperation and frustration may push them towards dubious wellness trends that do little more than help their money change hands. Beyond just facts and credible information, birthing parents need support from conception to long after delivery. And that requires a support network. And this is not a new need or concern, as Historian Laurence Tottelin pointed out:

Dr Tottelin: It's not a modern issue. Uh there's uh, in some texts. Uh, so there's, uh, um, there's acknowledgement that birth is a very, uh, can be a very difficult process, uh, that it can be very, very draining, um, that there's a loss of blood, um, that, uh, uh, a woman can be feel down basically, although there's no, not really a description of what we would call the postpartum depression, but, but there's, there's an acknowledgement that it's not always easy. And there are some, some, some treatments for that that would be more dietetic treatments or so regimens, um, for, to, to build back the blood, um, and, uh, to, to, to build back a strength. So, um, yeah, I guess there's this often there's, I think that there's this view that, uh, people might not have concerns around, uh, around those things in, in antiquity, uh, or even until recently, but it's, it's, it's not, it's not really true. There is, there is concern. Uh, and also, um, I mean, one

of the, maybe one of the main reasons why, uh, women, uh, or, or, or parents nowadays can become very depressed is, is, uh, isolation after, after, after birth, um, in, in the ancient world, generally, there's much more, uh, um, of, um, help from the community, uh, after, uh, after someone has given birth.

Alyssa: *It just so happened that all three of the experts I spoke to for this episode happened to be birthing parents. Dr Totellin shared with me that she experienced perinatal depression during her second pregnancy.*

Dr Bryony McNeill also shared some of her own experiences as a mother:

Dr McNeill: I've got, um, two, two children and I think there is a lot of pressure on women to have it all in the, um, bouncing back straightaway and, and have everything together. Um, and I think particularly there's a lot of pressure on things like breastfeeding, which again, I can see why you could be quite vulnerable with that point in time to, you know, if there's, you're kind of told that this might help with milk production, then you you'd be likely to try, you know, give anything a try. And so I think, yeah, I've been quite lucky myself to have a really supportive group of women and some really great mothers groups to try and break down some of those expectations.

Alyssa: *But again, just because that support and care is missing for a lot of parents, doesn't mean that the placenta is the answer.*

Dr McNeill: so to be honest, it seems like people do have a really positive experience of having the placenta encapsulation and, you know, a lot of the reports where people felt great and, you know, they improve their mood and their production and things. And I guess it's, you know, potentially placebo effect, but also possibly having, um, this supportive person looking after you, you know, after pregnancy can be quite a daunting time. And often the people who are doing the encapsulation, they're obviously very caring people and they they're supporting women, which perhaps that social side of that is actually also quite important for, you know, some of these proposed benefits that women may experience. But I guess again, just to reiterate that, you know, it's not cheap to have this done. And I personally, I feel like it's a little bit misleading to women, um, given that there really is no scientific backing. Um, and there's probably better things that you could spend your money on to, to help you in that postpartum recovery period.

Alyssa: *The placenta has always been known as an important part of pregnancy, as evidenced by the rich history of rituals surrounding it. However; but human placenta eating doesn't fall*

linto that category. With our rich diets, it's not providing any special nutrients or hormones for the birthing parent and could actually pose a risk to the baby with the spread of bacteria.

Look, we believe in total body autonomy. You can do and eat whatever makes you feel best as long as you aren't hurting anyone else. But the reality is this practice just. isn't. necessary.

This isn't the first wellness ploy that targets people's fears, and promises empowerment, but we here at the Vagina Museum hope that talking candidly about these practices will help you differentiate between helpful and harmful wellness and make more empowered choices about your body and health.

Alyssa: *Thanks for listening to The Vagina Museum podcast! For our research notes and further-reading links, take a look at the episode description in your podcast listening app.*

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